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Apex Media and the National Hospitality Institute (NHI) are proud to be partnering for the 2nd edition of Hospitality Champions. This award recognises and celebrates homegrown talent in the hopes of stirring a new generation to join a crucial sector in support of the nation's economic vision.

It has been a very different year for the industry, yet given the adversities we have seen adaptation, and encounter hospitality at its finest even in these trying times.

The Key Objectives

- 1) To raise the overall profile of the hospitality sector in Oman as a career choice for young Omanis.
- 2) To retain the graduates through ongoing training and development to aid their careers.
- 3) To provide a highly trained workforce in a critical

sector that supports the government's economic vision for the Sultanate.

The Process

Phase 1: Written nominations are submitted by hospitality sectors

Phase 2: NHI's panel visits shortlisted nominees for a one-on-one assessment

Phase 3: Judges discuss feedback and reach an agreement on the winners in each category

Both Apex Media and NHI thank the hospitality sectors for sponsoring their employees in this year's awards, and congratulations to our Hospitality Champions 2021.

The Hospitality Champions Team



These awards are designed to provide a window to all the great Omani talent that we have in the hospitality businesses in Oman. This part of our economy is an essential element of Oman's future and will only be of value if there are Omanis engaged and working in the industry. We appreciate the establishments' willingness to recognise these individuals working in front and behind the scenes keeping their businesses functioning. We are especially proud to be the initiators of these awards and to showcase some of the work we have been carrying out at NHI over the last 25 years. I would like to congratulate all the winners of Hospitality Champions 2021.



H H Sayyid Tarik bin Shabib al Said
Chairman, NHI



CALL CENTRE ATTENDANT

Ali Abadin Yaqoub al Balushi
W Muscat

Ali feels part of the W family and once diffused a tricky parking situation where security wanted to call the police.

CHAMPION HOUSEKEEPER



Shakir Doshambah Safar al Balushi
InterContinental Muscat

Highly Commended
Tareq al Adawi
Novotel Muscat Airport

A trusted housekeeper that doesn't need his rooms checked.

COMMIS CHEF



Mahmood al Wahaibi
Kempinski Hotel

Highly Commended
Khulood Juma Khaif al Busaidi
W Muscat

Mahmood never gets tired because he loves his job.

CONCIERGE



Issam Issa al Balushi
InterContinental Muscat

Highly Commended
Faisal Khalid Mohammed al Zadjali
W Muscat

Issam drove a guest to the airport in heavy rain. If she had missed the flight he was ready to drive her to Dubai.

DEMI CHEF



Bushra al Saadi
Kempinski Hotel

Bushra's dream is to be a chef and succeed in the role.

DETERMINED TO SUCCEED



Ahmed al Abdulsalam
Kempinski Hotel

Highly Commended
Mahir al Balushi
InterContinental Muscat

Ahmed has worked hard on his personal development and studied the difficult NEBOSH qualification.

ENGINEERING



Miaad Mohammed Rashid al Siyabi
Kempinski Hotel

Highly Commended
Shaima Abdullah Hilal al Balushi
W Muscat

Miaad sees Kempinski as her second home as she has been there from the beginning. She balances life between work and family.

EVENTS PERSON



Hisham al Abri
Crowne Plaza OCEC

Hisham is passionate about the industry and has dealt with some large accounts. He volunteered for clean up work during the COVID-19 period.

FINANCE

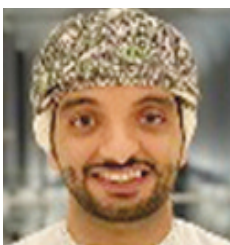


Mohammed Ali al Wahaibi
InterContinental Muscat

Highly Commended
Talal al Mazrouai
Kempinski Hotel

Mohammed has worked in various departments over the years. He originally improved his English by recording his supervisor's instructions.

FRONT OFFICE SENIOR



Laith al Ajmi
Kempinski Hotel

Highly Commended
Abdullah al Zakwani
Anantara Al Jabal Al Akhdar

Laith motivated his team to work 12-hour shifts during COVID-19 due to a staffing shortage.

THE CHAMPIONS

Presenting... the winners of Hospitality Champions 2021

THE JUDGES

Robert who hails from Scotland, started his career in the hospitality industry at 12 years. He went on to study his Hotel Management followed by his professional qualification of the HCIMA at Robert Gordon's in Aberdeen.

After several years in the Hospitality Industry as management and qualifying as a teacher with the University of Wales Robert arrived in Oman in 1995 to help open the National Hospitality Institute (NHI). In 1997 Robert was promoted to principal of the institute. During his time, NHI has grown into one of the leading institutes in the region for hospitality training. In 2003, the Gulf Chef School was launched to focus on the culinary needs of local industry. This part of NHI has trained several hundred chefs over the years. In 2009 Robert helped to launch the Oman Chefs Guild which is designed to ensure that there are culinary activities ongoing in Oman to help inspire young chefs. Robert is currently the treasurer of this forum.



Robert MacLean FIH



Richard Weetch

Richard Weetch is a First Class graduate of the Scottish Hotel School at the University of Strathclyde who started his career in the hotel industry with a particular interest in Food & Beverage. He then spent 15 years as a Fine Wine Buyer before becoming an international headhunter.

Based in Oman since 2006, Richard helps both government and private sector companies and ensure

that they can access the very best talent, both Omani and expatriate to help the sultanate's continued development.

A former judge in the Oman Restaurant Awards, he is hugely proud to have contributed to the Oman Hospitality Champions 2020 and is a strong advocate for development of Omanis in the hospitality sector.



Abdul Aziz Abdul Salam

Abdul Aziz is an award-winning customer experience & digital specialist with over 17 years of experience in the Middle East and Far East Asia.

He is passionate about customer experience and technology where he also leads multiple innovation platforms for the youth with a track record of building successful incubators to producing workable prototypes.

An alumnus of London Business School & Middlesex University London, he was featured on Oman Economic Review as one of Oman's young business role models. In addition to being big on sports he is also an Ironman race finisher.



Suhaila al Adawi

Suhaila al Adawi, AKA Suha, was born and raised in the Sultanate of Oman. She has been working for more than a decade in Administration and then moved to Human Resources, specifically Recruitment.

Throughout her career, Suhaila realised that the greatest passion in her life is to empower, motivate and encourage talents. She believes that one's success and growth is gained by elevating others.

Suhaila enjoys travelling, dining out and drinking chilled coffee lattes served with a friendly smile.

Suhaila Al Adawi, is Talent Acquisition Partner-HRSS - Oman at Al-Futtaim Group



Laila Zakwani

"Our country is renowned worldwide for its hospitality and these young Omanis epitomise our deep rooted generosity and welcoming spirit. They look to our past, taking inspiration from local traditions, measured with the future of hospitality and international industry standards to create unique experiences that make Oman a chosen destination."

Laila Zakwani is Executive Director at Apex Media, directing the awards programme that encourages excellence among Oman's youth, women, business and hospitality.

THE INTERVIEWERS

Presenting... the NHI team who put the finalists through their paces!



GINA MACLEAN

Team Leader Quality Assurance



AYESHA GODINHO

Team Leader Travel and Tourism



FREDDY HINES

Team Leader Food and Beverage

FRONT OFFICE JUNIOR



Maiysa al Busaidi
Kempinski Hotel

Highly Commended
Mandhr al Balushi
Al Bustan Palace, a Ritz - Carlton Hotel

Maiysa developed a new system for kids check-in with kids passports.

FRONT OFFICE JUNIOR



Maiysa al Busaidi
Kempinski Hotel

Highly Commended
Warda al Wardi
Crowne Plaza Muscat

Mahmood wakes up every morning and says "I will work whatever hours I need to get my work done"

KITCHEN ASSISTANT



Saif Rashid Humaid al Salehi
Al Bustan Palace, a Ritz - Carlton Hotel

Saif managed to find a ring in the garbage after it was lost by a guest

IT PERSON



Zubair al Balushi
InterContinental Muscat

Highly Commended
Hussain al Riyami
Kempinski Hotel

Zubair is known in the hotel as the 'Fixer'. He is known for his caring and patient attitude especially towards new recruits.

INDUSTRY LEADERS WHO NOMINATED THEIR CHAMPIONS...



LAUNDRY

Asad Khalfan Suwaid al Harrasi
InterContinental Muscat

Highly Commended
Humaid al Fahdi
Anantara Al Jabal Al Akhdar Resort

Asad came in from his vacation for the interview and assists in housekeeping when they are short-staffed.

SALES PERSON



Mohammed al Zadjali
Al Bustan Palace, a Ritz - Carlton Hotel

Highly Commended
Faris al Kiyumi
Kempinski Hotel

Once arranged for a VIP guest who liked the Mussar to be fitted with one and had one tailored specially.

SECURITY



Akif al Khathiri
Kempinski Hotel

Highly Commended
Salim Abdullah Salim al Anqoodi
InterContinental Muscat

Akif wants his hotel to be the safest and most secure hotel in Oman.

SOUS CHEF

Mohammed Mansoor Darwish al Raisi
Intercontinental Muscat

Highly Commended
Shamis Mohammed al Balushi
InterContinental Muscat

Mohammed is known as the happy chef and during COVID-19 interacted directly with guests to assess their dietary needs.



Ali al Ajmi
Kempinski Hotel

Highly Commended
Hamoud al Suliemi
InterContinental Muscat

Ali loves his job as it allows him to meet different people and work with his team.

TEAM CHAMPION



Adil al Balushi
InterContinental Muscat

Highly Commended
Talib al Balushi
InterContinental Muscat

Adil is passionate about his food and has created several dishes and posted them on Instagram.



UNsung HERO

Zeyana al Abdulsalam
Holiday Inn Muscat Al Seeb

Highly Commended
Munir al Balushi
Al Bustan Palace, a Ritz - Carlton Hotel

During the COVID-19 lockdowns Zeyana organised food for those casual workers that had been laid off. Food often bought at her own expense.

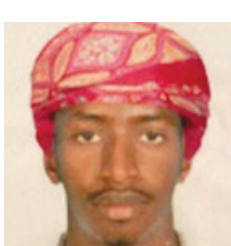


WAITER SENIOR

Omran al Balushi
Anantara Al Jabal Al Akhdar Resort

Highly Commended
Badr al Amri
Kempinski Hotel

Omran delighted an Emarati guest with special flowers for his anniversary.



WAITER JUNIOR

Arafat Saloom Sulaiman al Tali
W Muscat

Highly Commended
Muhannad al Balushi
Kempinski Hotel

Arafat always checks customers' last names so that he can use them when talking to them.



YOUNG HOTELIER

Loay Adil Mubarak Bahwan
W Muscat

Highly Commended
Faisal Ali Salim al Zawaidi
Crowne Plaza Muscat

Loay believes in working from the ground up and believes that managers should experience the departments before they are promoted.



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DUQM PORT GETS NEW BUNKER TERMINAL
GO TO PAGE 06 BUSINESS

NEWS BRIEFS

STATE COUNCIL CHAIRMAN HEADS TO TANZANIA

Muscat - Delegated by His Majesty Sultan Haitham bin Tarik, Sheikh Abdulmalik Abdullah al Khalili, chairman of State Council, left for the United Republic of Tanzania on Wednesday to take part in celebrations of the country's 60th Independence Anniversary.

Sheikh Khalili is accompanied by Salem Mohammed al Riyami and Dr Raya Salem al Manthri, members of the State Council.

OMAN CONDOLES INDIAN GOVT

Muscat - The Foreign Ministry of Oman has expressed condolences to the government and the people of the Republic of India and to the families of the victims of the helicopter crash carrying Gen Bipin Rawat, Chief of Defence Staff, his wife and 12 others.

The Mi-17V5 helicopter came down in hills near Coonoor city in the state of Tamil Nadu in India on Wednesday, killing all passengers but one.



MoCIIP holds meet to attract foreign investment



Japanese fashion tycoon Yusaku Maezawa in orbit

ROAD TO PROSPERITY

Oman-Saudi road to boost economic activity on both sides

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman and Saudi Arabia inaugurated the Rub al Khali (Empty Quarter) road and two border posts connecting the two countries on Wednesday.

The 725km road will ease movement between the two countries and contribute to the integration of supply chains which will help achieve economic integration between the two.

Following the inauguration, many in Oman who *Muscat Daily* spoke with hailed the development.

Khalaf al Touqi, an economic analyst, said, "The road is of strategic importance and has many benefits. It will achieve immediate gains, such as an increase in the number of pilgrims and the volume of trade exchange between Oman and Saudi Arabia, and encourage the private sector to establish businesses along the border. Additionally, it will facilitate the establishment of integrated service areas, hotels and rest houses which will be a boon for the local economy."

According to Touqi, the road will also encourage Saudi Arabia to set up an oil pipeline across the border to Duqm for export to Asian and African countries.

Nasser al Mabsali, director general of Ibri Industrial City (Madayn), described the road opening as "very important for the movement of individuals and commercial exchange".

He informed that the proximity of Ibri Industrial City to Saudi Arabia is an important opportunity for Saudi investors to come and learn about the investment opportunities in the city.

He explained that Ibri Industrial



The border checkpoint has high-tech facilities designed to streamline traffic and related services for travellers entering and exiting the country (ONA)

ROP starts operations at Rub al Khali border post

Muscat - Royal Oman Police started operations at the Rub al Khali border checkpoint as part of the Omani-Saudi desert highway's security management system.

The border checkpoint has high-tech facilities designed to streamline traffic and related services (passport and residency) for travellers entering and exiting the country. Visas and immigration procedures will be processed speedily at open service halls.

The checkpoint also provides customs clearance services, including digitised inspection of exports and imports.



eries which is in much demand in the Saudi market."

Nasser al Hosni, director of the Happy Line of Transport, said that the opening of the Empty Quarter border post is a great step to facilitate the smooth entry and exit of goods that will result in invigorating the economies of the two countries.

"The road will help revitalise the Duqm region to be a global hub for export of oil and other

goods in the future and encourage the establishment of railways for trade exchange between Gulf states and export of their products to other countries," said Hosni.

Sultan al Rawahi, a citizen, said, "We thank God for this. It will help people go for pilgrimage, both Umrah and Hajj. The road will create job opportunities for many. I will look into setting up services along the way, such as

fuel stations and hotels."

According to Saeed bin Ali al Yahyahi, director of Roads Department in Dhahirah governorate, four investment areas have been allocated on the Omani side of the Empty Quarter road - covering a distance of 161km from the Ibri roundabout to the Rub al Khali checkpoint - with the aim of establishing integrated service areas such as petrol stations and hotels.

MoH awaits paediatric doses of Pfizer to start vaccination

Muscat - The Ministry of Health is awaiting doses of Pfizer vaccine against COVID-19 for children before it starts an immunisation campaign for five to 11 year olds.

Following the Supreme Committee's announcement in October to vaccinate children in the five to 11 age group starting in the first week of November, commencement of a vaccination drive was eagerly awaited by citizens and residents alike.

Responding to *Muscat Daily's* query on the delay, an MoH official said it has not been able to start vaccinating children "because the Food and Drug Administration (of USA) gave approval to vaccinate children in this age group with a new formula of Pfizer vaccine only. Till date, the company hasn't released the new formula".

According to the ministry official,



cial, "vaccination for this age group will start after receiving the needed quantity of paediatric vaccine doses (new formula)".

The Supreme Committee had decided to allow all students of Grades 5 to 11 to receive in-person offline education in schools starting November and directed MoH to vaccinate children at

schools. "Vaccination of children 5-11 years old will be mainly done at schools," the MoH official said.

Meanwhile, 23 new cases of COVID-19 were registered in Oman in a 24-hour period on Wednesday, taking the total number of cases to 304,654, according to an MoH statement.

(Written by Syed Fasiuddin)

CBO suspends operations of Oman United Exchange

Muscat - Central Bank of Oman (CBO) has announced the suspension of operations of Oman United Exchange.

A statement said, "Central Bank of Oman hereby notifies the public of its decision to suspend operations of Oman United Exchange LLC as of Tuesday, December 7, 2021, until further notice."

Oman United Exchange was found to be in violation of regulations set for two professions - 'Money Changing' and 'Money Changing and Issue of Drafts' - as per directions issued by CBO.

The action was taken by virtue of powers vested with CBO under Banking Law 114/2000.

CBO has directed Oman United Exchange to swiftly settle outstanding remittances and all other dues.

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Meeting held to attract foreign investment

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP), in cooperation with the Foreign Ministry, organised a meeting with the heads of diplomatic missions accredited in Oman on Wednesday. It was the fourth in a series held by MoCIIP to attract more foreign investments to the sultanate.

The meeting was held under the patronage of H E Aseela Salem al Samsami, Undersecretary for Investment Promotion in MoCIIP, H E Sheikh Khalifa bin Ali al Harthy, Undersecretary for Diplomatic Affairs in the Foreign Ministry, and H E Maitha bint Saif al Mahrooqi, Undersecretary for Tourism in the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism.

"The meeting was intended to present incentives and investment opportunities available in various sectors. The ministry aims to attract investments in



(Supplied photo)

According to MoCIIP, the meet aimed at encouraging investments in line with the ministry's objectives to stimulate the national economy to achieve Oman Vision 2040 goals

sectors such as food security, health and the information technology," said H E Aseela.

H E Harthy commended the efforts made by MoCIIP in organising the meeting to attract more foreign investments and

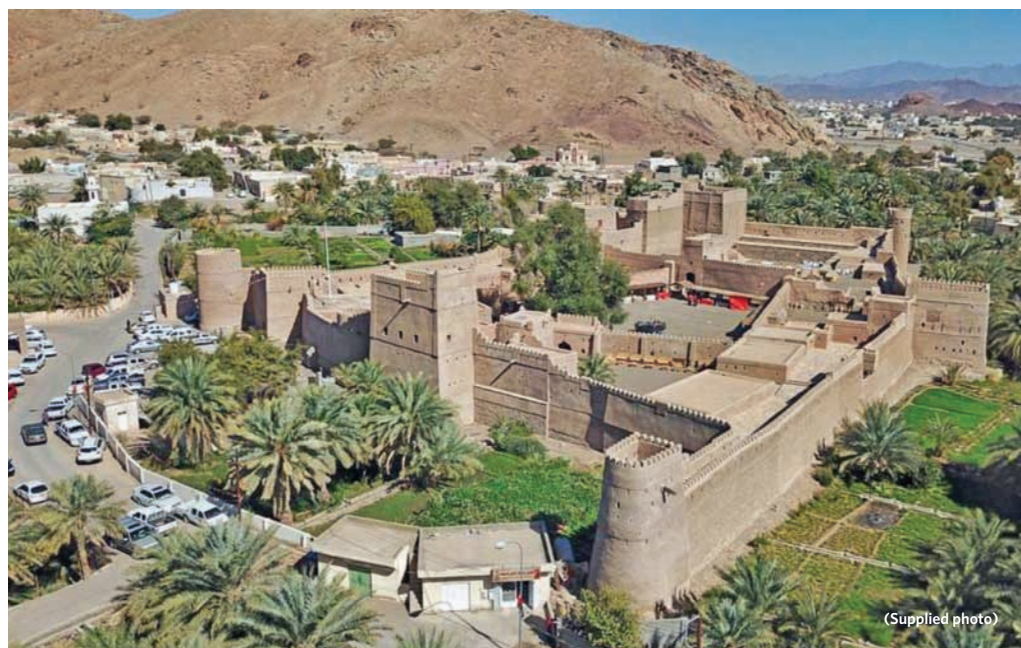
stressed the importance of continuing communication with accredited diplomatic missions in Oman to present the investment opportunities available in the sultanate.

According to MoCIIP, the

meeting aimed at encouraging investments in line with the ministry's objectives to stimulate the national economy to achieve the goals of Oman Vision 2040. It invited ambassadors to review the economic developments in

the sultanate in various target sectors.

The ministry added that the sultanate offers special competitive advantages, especially after the issuance of the Foreign Capital Investment Law recently.



(Supplied photo)

Dhahirah's eco hotels draw big crowds

Our Correspondent
Muscat

As many as 6,796 people were guests in green hotels (eco-friendly hotels) and other accommodation facilities in Dhahirah governorate in 2021 from January to September, according to the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism.

"Dhahirah has witnessed the establishment of many tourist and hotel facilities, green hotels and guest houses in three wilayats of the governorate," said Ali bin Khamis al Sudairi, assistant director of Heritage and Tourism Department.

"The number of licensed tourism hotel establishments in the wilayat of Ibri has grown to four, and there are 13 green hotels spread over Ibri, Yanqul and Dhank."

Sudairi informed that there is growing interest in starting green hotel projects in the governorate.

The number of hotels in the sultanate grew to 547 in 2020, compared to 492 in 2019 and

Dhahirah has witnessed the establishment of many tourist and hotel facilities, green hotels and guest houses in three wilayats of the governorate

ALI BIN KHAMIS AL SUDAIRI

412 in 2018.

Among hotel guests - from January to September 2021 - 2,765 were Omanis, 199 from GCC states, 540 from other Arab countries and 3,292 tourists of other nationalities.

According to available statistics, there were 2,348 visitors - domestic and international - to castles and forts in the Dhahirah in 2021.

There were 366,360 visitors to castles and forts in Oman in 2018, and 426,525 in 2019 compared to 133,464 in 2020 - a de-

crease of 68.6 per cent.

The Ministry of heritage and Tourism also informed that several forts and castles have been restored, while restoration works in architecturally distinguished buildings are currently underway.

The sultanate welcomed 3,506,441 tourists in 2019, which was 8.2 per cent more than the 2018 figure of 3,241,757 and 75.1 per cent less than 2020 - 874,444 tourists.

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism confirmed that the reason for the drop in tourist numbers was the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic around the world which affected the sector.

There were 193,467 cruise ship visitors in 2018, 383,488 in 2019 and 109,647 in 2020 - a decrease of 71.4 per cent compared to 2019.

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism is currently working to establish several projects to attract tourists to achieve the strategic goals of Oman Vision 2040.

Makers Oman Centre joins Global Entrepreneurship Week celebrations

Muscat - Makers Oman Centre at the Innovation Park Muscat of the Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation, in cooperation with the University of Nizwa, hosted an event on Wednesday as part of the Global Entrepreneurship Week 2021.

More than 40 student companies and entrepreneurs took part in workshops on innovation and how to create prototypes for innovative ideas.

The event included a variety of workshops on innovation and the Fourth Industrial Revolution technologies, such as smart manufacturing and 3D printing techniques. Additionally, there were lectures on intellectual property rights and innovation incubators.



(Supplied photo)

Hilal bin Nasser al Shibli, director general of Makers Oman Centre, stated that these events are held within the framework of cooperation and partnership between the centre and local com-

munity institutions.

The goals and the role of the centre are in line with the objectives of the Global Entrepreneurship Week celebrations organised by the University

of Nizwa.

The centre aims to encourage creativity and innovation as well as facilitate the transformation of the sultanate into a knowledge economy.

Video on Oman-US FTA

Muscat - The Oman American Business Center (OABC), in cooperation with the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion and the US Embassy in Muscat, has launched a promotional video marking the 12th anniversary of the signing of the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between Oman and the US.

The promotional video aims to educate the public about the agreement, besides encouraging more companies to benefit from it. The promotional video, titled 'Successes of the US-Oman Free Trade Agreement', highlights stories of some US and Omani companies whose success is attributed to the FTA.

The video will be screened at Oman's pavilion in Expo 2020 Dubai as part of the sultanate's efforts to attract investors.

ONA

MAFWR warns against buying fish from street vendors

Our Correspondent
Muscat

The Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Water Resources (MAFWR) has warned people against buying fish from street vendors.

A statement issued by the ministry, said, 'People must not buy fish from roadside vendors to avoid environment and hygiene issues. Customers should only buy from authorised places to avoid any problems.'

Despite a ban introduced by MAFWR, as per a decision issued in December 2014, vendors continue to sell fish on streets in several parts of the country.

An MAFWR official said, "According to Decision No 312/2014, it is illegal to sell fish outside markets and ports spec-



(File photo)

ified by the ministry.

"Selling fish on the streets can be hazardous to the environment and human health as vendors throw fish waste on the streets. Also, selling fish other than in areas specified by the ministry

negatively impacts sellers who abide by the rules."

MAFWR regularly conducts campaigns to restrict such practices and advises sellers to abide by the government's decision or face legal action, the official said.

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Exotic seafood restaurant Dunes to open in Jebel Sifah

Our Correspondent

Muscat

With exotic seafood and stunning views, Muscat's newest beach restaurant Dunes will open on Saturday.

Located a stone's throw away from Jebel Sifah Resort, Dunes is being launched by Muriya, Oman's largest and most diversified real estate developer.

Speaking about Dunes, Mahmoud el Baroudi, chief operating officer of Muriya, said, "This luxurious outdoor dining and hospitality venue brings a whole new gastronomic experience to diners in Oman. It will be catering to families, corporates, couples as well as individuals."

He said that Dunes will serve excellent sea food, including a wide range of local and international cuisine, delicious desserts and signature beverages.

"It is only a 40-minute drive from Muscat and provides an excellent getaway both during weekends and weekdays. Charming residents and visitors



The management team of Dunes restaurant (Supplied photo)

with its natural surroundings, resort-style amenities and incredible living and hospitality options, Jebel Sifah is a hotspot for socialising."

Seif el Khouly, chief development officer of Muriya, said Jebel Sifah is a rapidly growing desti-

nation and they continue to introduce "even more unique offerings that surpass the expectations of visitors and residents. Dunes restaurant is a wonderful addition to our expanding portfolio and the perfect place to enjoy a leisurely meal

set in an atmosphere designed for ultimate relaxation".

Khouly said the restaurant is just one in an array of leisurely amenities that make Jebel Sifah one of Oman's best-loved destinations.

Jebel Sifah is spread over an

area of 6.2mn sqm. It also houses freehold residences, which are available to own or rent and upcoming real estate projects, including Sifah Oasis, Beachfront Phase II, Marina Apartments and Sifah Farms.

GHEDEX organises Future Skills and HRD meet

Muscat - GHEDEX - Oman's official Higher Education Exhibition held its Future Skills & HRD Conference and awards from December 6 to 8 at the Crowne Plaza Muscat.

The event was organised under the patronage of the Ministry of Higher Education, Re-

search and Innovation, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Labour, Oman Academic Accreditation Authority and Quality Assurance in partnership with Oman Information Technology Society, Oman Society of Petroleum Services, Oman Society of Education Technology and several

other government and non-government agencies, working towards future skills and human resource development.

The three-day hybrid conference was inaugurated by chief guest H E Dr Bakhit Ahmed al Mahri, Undersecretary in the Ministry of Higher Education, Re-

search and Innovation.

The event witnessed the recognition of associations, companies, academies and ministries for future skills and HRD, and conducted an award ceremony to honour them.

Industry majors such as the Petroleum Development Oman

(PDO), Khimji Ramdas - Eshraqa, Oman Environmental Service Holding Company (b'eah), Majan University College and many others won awards in categories like AI, IoT, Robotics, Future Technology and Employability.

(Contributed by Akshaya Pavanje)

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TBY to hold panel discussion on Vision 2040

Muscat - The Business Year (TBY), in partnership with the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion and the Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit, is hosting a special event titled 'Oman Vision 2040 and the Future of Investment', on December 12 at the Oman Convention and Exhibition Centre.

The event will be attended by 150 top CEOs and government figures, who will gather to discuss the future of investment. The event is organised in collaboration with the Oman International Development & Investment Company (Ominvest), as its strategic partner and with the support of leading sponsors.

Sunday's programme will begin with an address by H E Qais al Yousef, Minister of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion, followed by a speech from Abdullah al Hakmani, head of Projects Management Office in the

Oman Vision 2040 Implementation Follow-up Unit.

The event will offer the international business community an opportunity to understand the key pillars of Oman Vision 2040, not only as a wide-ranging blueprint for economic and social development, but also as a roadmap on where the Omani economy is heading in the coming decades.

A panel discussion will feature key personalities from diverse sectors of the country, including Anwar al Jabri, group president for Investment Banking at Ominvest and CEO of Jabreen Capital; Aimen al Hosni, CEO, Oman Airports; Mohammed al Harthy, executive vice president, Strategic Development Sector of be'ah; Saleh al Rumhi, CEO, Oman Electricity & Transmission Company; and Khaled al Kayed, CEO of Bank Nizwa. The session will be moderated by Mohab al Hinai, co-founder of Sustainable Investments.



RO85,000 social support for 17 majlises in North Batinah

Our Correspondent

Muscat

Jusoor Foundation continues its efforts to provide support to the community and contribute to achieving sustainable development through the implementation of development projects and support for various social projects.

In this regard, Jusoor Foundation has completed the provision of partial support to eight more public majlises in the second phase for the year 2021, with a total social investment of RO40,000. With this, the total number of majlises that received support reached 17 in North Bati-

nah, with a total social investment of RO85,000.

Funded by OQ, Sohar Aluminium and Vale Oman, and implemented by Jusoor, the project aims at providing partial support to the majlis benefiting from the programme. This is based on the requests submitted by the communities and after evaluation by Jusoor during site visits to those majlis to determine their fulfilment of certain criteria.

The Omani public majlis is a prominent component of society and has played a significant role in the past and present, as it has been used to serve the community by hosting various social events and sessions.

Announcement of Capital Reduction

In accordance with the provisions of Article 150 of the Commercial Companies Law the company Al Sid Al Mumayaz al Muqawalat which is registered with the Commercial Registration No. 1276039, hereby announces that it is going to reduce its capital from Omani Rials 250,000,000 to 3,000,000.

Whoever has any objections to the foregoing shall present the reasons for such objection to the Secretariat of Commercial Registry at the Ministry of Commerce and Industry within 30 days from the date hereof.

The Management and staff of
Muscat Overseas Group, Al Tamman Group,
Qais Omani Establishment
and associated companies express their heartfelt

CONDOLENCES

to

Sheikh Mustahail bin Ahmed Al Mashani

and

Sheikh Salim bin Mustahail Al Mashani

and family

on the sad demise of

Sheikha Salma bint Mohammed Al Mashani

May Allah bless her soul and
may she rest in eternal peace.

MARKET WATCH	
MSX30	4,011.94
BSE Sensex	58,649.68
FOREX RATES	
(RO1 equals)	
Indian Rs	195.89
Pakistani Rs	459.20
Bangladeshi Taka	222.97
Philippine Peso	130.51
Sri Lankan Rs	527.30
*Rates as on December 08 Source: xe.com	

BRIEFS

Qatar, Turkey extend currency swap deal

Qatar and Turkey have announced they agreed to extend a currency swap deal between their central banks, as Ankara's lira has plunged in value fuelling an economic crisis.

According to a joint statement on Tuesday, the two sides 'welcomed the signing of the agreement on the extension and amendment of the Turkish lira-Qatari riyal currency exchange arrangement' between their central banks.

The announcement came during Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's visit to Doha, where he met with Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al Thani and discussed enhancing cooperation in various fields including the economy.

The agreement in 2018 was extended for the first time in May 2020, with the overall limit increased from US\$5bn equivalent of Turkish lira and Qatari riyal to US\$15bn.

US Congress reaches deal to avert debt default

US senators struck a deal on Tuesday to create a one-time law allowing Democrats to lift the nation's borrowing authority and avert a catastrophic credit default without requiring votes from the opposition Republicans.

The House of Representatives approved the fix in an evening vote and it is expected to be approved by the Senate in the coming days - allowing lawmakers to avert the crisis with a simple 51-vote majority in the upper chamber.

The Bipartisan Policy Center said last week it expected the United States would no longer be able to meet its debt repayment obligations between December 21 and January 28. US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen has put the deadline even earlier - next Wednesday.

Duqm Port gets new bunker terminal

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman Oil Marketing Company (OOMCO) launched a new bunker terminal at the Port of Duqm. Strategically located on Oman's south-east coast, the new marine fuel terminal will serve the international shipping market given its close proximity to significant shipping traffic accessing the Suez Canal, Arabian Gulf, and Indian Ocean.

"OOMCO's development of the Duqm Bunker Terminal is part of Oman's Vision 2040 development plan to diversify the sultanate's economy, including the marine and logistics sectors, while leveraging the country's strategic location," Hilal Ali al Kharusi, chairman of OOMCO, said in a statement.

"The future of the logistics sector in Oman gets stronger with such initiatives that link us with the rest of the world. We are positive that this project will enable more economic diversification and position Oman as a world-class international logistics hub," he added.

The new Port of Duqm terminal will offer the highest specification HSF0, VLSFO and LSMGO marine fuels in compliance with ISO 8217, and has been designed to meet the increasing demands for quality marine fuel, including all low sulphur fuel-compliant marine fuels.

Bunkers will also be delivered by barge, with the addition of the 10,000 metric tonnes. The services available at OOMCO Bunker Terminal will ensure that all



port, including pilotage, freshwater supply, waste collection, tug services, crew change, de-slopping services, ship handling, ship spares and dry dock services.

"The bunker fuel market in the Middle-East and Africa region is expected to grow at more than 12 per cent during the period of 2022-2025. The commissioning

"Through this milestone, we are taking a step forward to achieving our goal to be among the top fuel bunker suppliers in the GCC by 2027," he added.

OOMCO's bunkering services are underpinned by the nearby Duqm Refinery, which, when completed, will have the capacity for 230,000 barrels per day. In addition, the nearby Ras Markaz storage terminal is also currently under construction, geared to offer 6mn barrels of storage capacity once completed in 2022. An additional capacity of 19mn barrels is earmarked for the site as part of its future development.

"We are extremely proud to see our new bunker terminal open for business at the port of Duqm. This world-class facility is located close to some of the world's busiest shipping lanes, and will operate to the highest standards of safety, quality and service. For domestic, regional and international shipping, Duqm offers a smart, efficient alternative to diverting to other ports in the region, saving time and money, and avoiding the risk of further delay," said Ali Ahmed Muqaibal, general manager - international retail at OOMCO.

of the bunker terminal means OOMCO can now offer the growing number of Duqm fleet customers, access to high-quality marine fuels that meet their requirements coupled with state-of-the-art facilities, support infrastructure and above all effective supply chain," said Husain Jama Bait Ishaq, acting CEO of OOMCO.

OWWSC signs agreement with China's State Grid International

Our Correspondent
Muscat

Oman Water and Wastewater Services Company (OWWSC) has signed an agreement with China's State Grid International Development Company to provide necessary equipment and devices for seawater desalination operations in the Al Kahel area in Al Wusta Governorate.

The agreement is based on the social responsibility of the Chinese company. The production capacity of seawater desalination plant in Al Kahel is 200 cubic metres per day and is expected to contribute to provide drinking water service to the areas that surrounded the Special Economic Zone at Duqm.

The plant will also operate on renewable solar energy, which is in line with the company's approach to preserving the environment and human health by reducing harmful emissions.

The agreement was signed by Qais bin Saud al Zakwani, CEO of



OWWSC and Qiu Yang, official representative of the CEO of State Grid International Development Company.

Zakwani said, "In terms of enhancing cooperation and social responsibility of OWWSC and State Grid International Development Company, the agreement was signed on Wednesday. This confirms the commitment of our partners from local and international companies towards their social responsibility, as it is in line with the 2040 master plan for the

water sector, which aims to cover 98 per cent of the sultanate's governorates with desalinated drinking water through desalination plants."

Wei Lu, chief technology officer at State Grid International Development Company, said, "The company is grateful for all the cooperation and support it receives from its partners in Oman. State Grid is one of the leading companies in China working in the field of services, and we are pleased to take this

CBO issues RO99mn worth treasury bills

Our Correspondent
Muscat

A tender of the government treasury bills (issue number 129) was announced by the Central Bank of Oman (CBO) this week.

Total value of the allotted treasury bills amounted to RO99mn, for a maturity period of 28 days, from Wednesday until January 5, 2022. The average accepted price reached RO99.950 for every RO100 bill, and the minimum accepted price also arrived at RO99.950.

The average discount rate and the average yield reached 0.6517 per cent and 0.6521 per cent, respectively. The interest rate on the repo operations with the CBO is 0.5 per cent, while the discount rate on the treasury bills discounting facility with the central bank is 0.75 per cent.

Treasury bills are short-term highly secured financial instruments issued by the Ministry of Finance, and they provide licensed commercial banks the opportunity to invest their sur-



plus funds.

The CBO acts as the issue manager and provides the added advantage of ready liquidity through discounting and repurchase facilities (repo).

Furthermore, treasury bills promote the local money market by creating a benchmark yield curve for short-term interest rates. The government may also resort to this instrument whenever felt necessary for financing its recurrent expenditures.

UAE moves weekend to steal march on regional competitors

Dubai, UAE - The United Arab Emirates' move to a Western-style Saturday-Sunday weekend is an attempt to maintain its edge over rising regional competitors, particularly Saudi Arabia, experts said.

The wealthy state surprised many with Tuesday's announcement, which will make it the only Gulf country not to observe weekends on a Friday, the Muslim day of prayer, and Saturday.

The UAE also said it was reducing its official working week to four-and-a-half days, with employees at government bodies to finish at noon on a Friday.

Although the changes were only mandated for the public sector and schools, analysts expect private companies to follow suit, at least with the Saturday-Sunday weekend.

The shift is clever, they say, as it brings the UAE into line with global practices and also makes it a more desirable location for foreign workers and businesses.

Competition is hotting up as neighbouring Saudi Arabia, seeking to diversify its oil-reliant economy, tries to turn its capital into an international centre in the mould of Dubai.

Last year, the Saudis threw down the gauntlet by saying they would not sign contracts with companies that have their regional headquarters outside the kingdom.

"The pragmatic economic calculation behind this decision is to better align the UAE's economy with global business standards," said Robert Mogielnicki, senior resident scholar at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington.

"The softer side", however, has to do with 'liveability and well-being'.

"The UAE wants to retain its position as the region's preferred hub for international businesspeople, expatriate residents and tourists. Adjusting the work week is just one of the myriad ways the UAE is trying to keep its



competitive edge," Mogielnicki said.

'Several steps ahead'

Driven by its oil wealth, the former British protectorate has left behind its humble beginnings of tents and simple mud-brick houses to become, over five decades since its formation in 1971, one of the biggest players in the Middle East.

The UAE has been continuously amending its laws in the past few years, presenting itself as a modernising force in a

A similar, if more limited, loosening-up is underway in Saudi Arabia, which now allows women to drive and has eased its strict Islamic dress code.

"UAE is going global, and is aligning with what prevails in most of the countries in the world", said Emirati professor of political science Abdulkhaleq Abdulla.

"Given the ongoing social liberalisation in Saudi Arabia, recent decisions coming out of the UAE reflect an attempt to stay several steps ahead of Saudi Arabia," he added.

Nasser Saidi, founder of a regional economic consultancy firm, says the weekend shift represents a 'major reform that will result in greater international integration, and in particular economic and financial integration of the UAE economy'.

While becoming the only Gulf country not to have a Friday-Saturday weekend, the UAE now comes into line with the non-

Arab world.

"It will mean international synchronisation for businesses" with the majority of countries in the US, Europe and Asia, and with financial and oil markets, added the ex-chief economist of the Dubai International Financial Centre.

Under the new timetable, the public sector weekend starts at noon on Fridays and ends on Sunday. Friday prayers at mosques will be held after 1:15pm. The UAE observed a Thursday-Friday weekend until 2006, when it switched to Fridays and Saturdays.

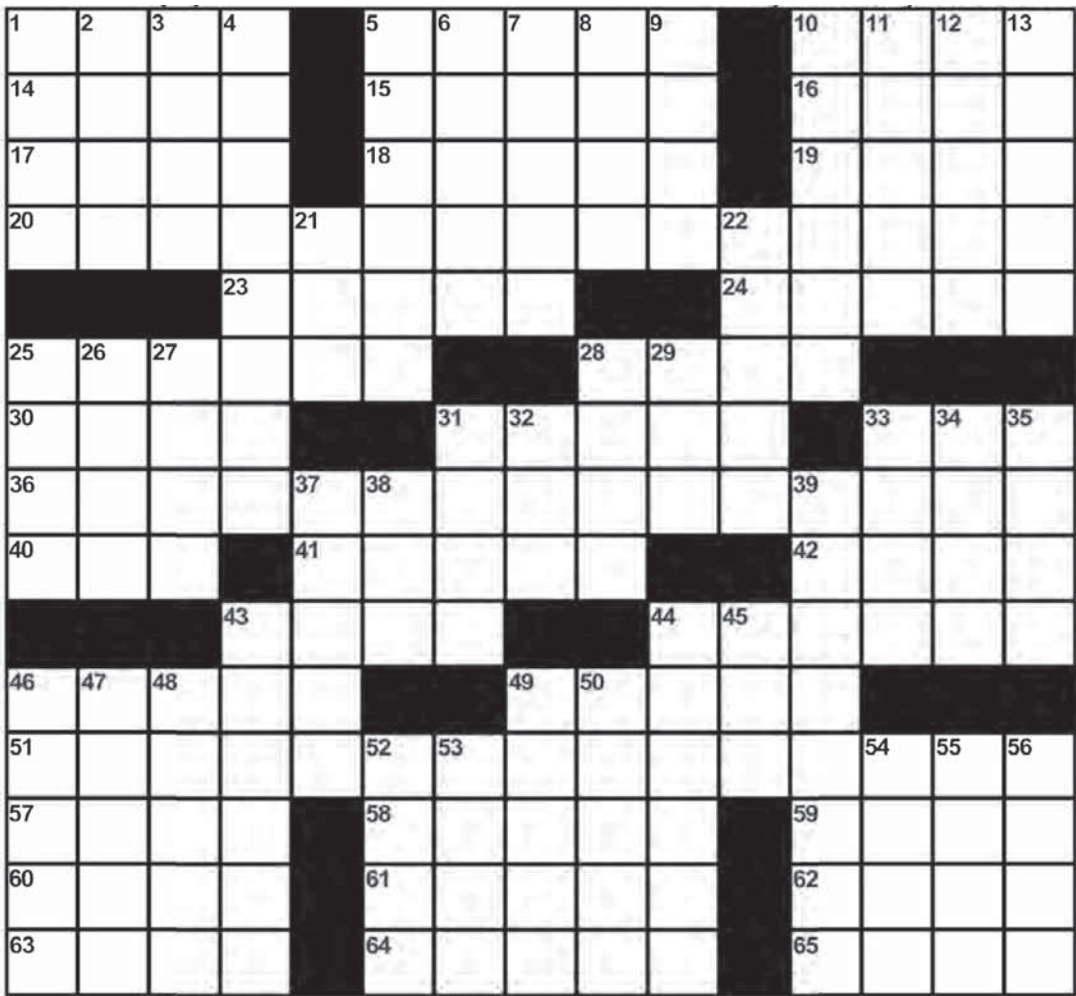
For Abdulla, the latest move is all about staying ahead of the game.

"The UAE, and Dubai in particular, have always been a trendsetter, a role model in the region," he said.

"Dubai is ten steps ahead, but there is room in the region for a Dubai 2, Dubai 3 and more."

APF

DAILY CROSSWORD



ACROSS

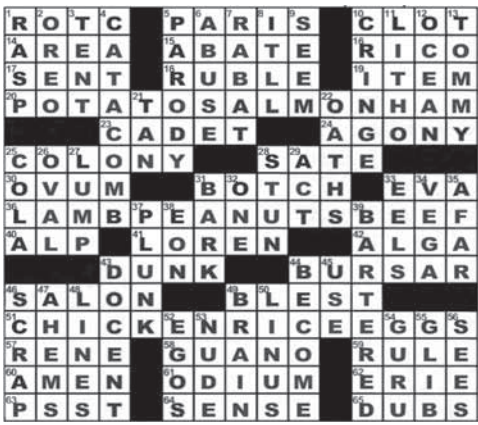
- 1) Lennon or Penn 40)
Key grip's workplace
5) Blacksmith's work-
place 41) Express feel-
ings
10) Time machine desti-
nation 42) Turkish mili-
tary title
14) "To Sir, With Love"
singer- 43) Man-goat of
myth
actress 44) Certain
string player of old
15) Turn aside, as one's
eyes 46) Ceremony site
16) Palo_, Calif. 49) In
progress
17) "While" attachment
of old 51) Three front
backers
18) La Scala's place 57)
Foul mood
19) Repair sock holes
58) Modify, as the Con-
stitution
20) Four front backers
59) Like a moray
23) Ocean land 60) Do

- some lawn work
24) Run with a marriage
61) The 100 in a pound
license? 62) Chest rattle
25) Medical solution 63)
Old Russian despot
28) Nursing home staff?
64) Kicked in the pot, as
chips
30) Not invitational, in
65) Places for pamper-
ing
tournaments
31) "Two wrongs don't
make a
right," e.g.
33) Not talking
36) Four front backers
DOWN
1) Malamute's load
2) Continental currency
3) "On top of which ..."
4) Fuel for the human
body
5) Feuders on a game
show
6) Like an old shepherd's
charges
7) Get a new tenant for

- 8) Neutral shade
9) Large part of Sicilian
scenery
10) Table tennis item
11) Texas battle site
12) Guitar securer
13) 1,000 kilograms
21) Certain psychedelic
22) Keep a subscription
25) Becomes inedible, in
a way
26) Unsharpened sword
27) Where shots are put
28) Hospice offering
29) "Long... .."
31) Author's unknown
byline, briefly
32) EPA concern of the
1970s
33) Adoring Biblical trio
34) Grunts of disgust
35) Part of many entrees
37) Considers, as a
judge
38) Swift Aussie bird
39) Law firm elite
43) More lucrative, as a
contract
44) Bullied (with "over")
45) Thee, today
46) Item in the black
47) Generates interest?

- 48) Russian forest
49) Word with "press"
or "free"
50) Stolen goods re-
ceiver
52) Snack of Spain
53) Word of approval
54) Tide type
55) Legendary Fitzgerald
of jazz
56) Some breads

NOTE PAD



YOUR DAILY HOROSCOPE



ARIES MARCH 21-APRIL 19

It might do you some good today to step back from your crowd of friends and look at things from an outsider's perspective. You'll finally see things as they truly are, which will either reinforce what you were hoping for or make you feel like big changes are in order. If it's the latter, don't be alarmed. Do what feels right, and don't shy away from explaining yourself. People respect the truth and they'll respect you for speaking it.



LEO JULY 23-AUGUST 22

If one of your friends or family members has been holding out on you, today they'll come clean and let you in on what's been going on. You'll find that your suspicions were right, but you might want to play the surprised card. It'll be much more fun! A celebration might be in order, so have some suggestions in your back pocket just in case no one has planned anything yet. Play cruise director for a day and you'll be more popular than ever.



SAGITTARIUS NOVEMBER 22-DECEMBER 21

Envision what you can accomplish. Create a crystal-clear picture in your mind of what you want. Focus on that image and try to emulate it with your actions. You'll be giving yourself a road map to follow for the future. From working up the nerve to talk to that amazing person who makes your heart flutter to marching into your boss's office and asking for that overdue raise, you'll find the courage you need by picturing the scenario.



TAURUS APRIL 20-MAY 20

As the leader in a group, you need to take into account what it is the rest of the group members want. Being the boss doesn't mean you get to do whatever you want! It means you have to what's best for the group. Try to be extra sensitive to the people who don't really know what's going on. It's up to you to bring them up to speed. By the end of the day, everyone will be working well together. You'll get a rush from the people around you.



VIRGO AUGUST 23-SEPTEMBER 22

Get as active as possible today. Your mood will be greatly improved by accelerating your heartbeat. Walk instead of ride, get on your bike instead of into your car, and take the stairs instead of the elevator. If you continue with these small changes, you'll start to notice real mental and physical changes sooner than you think. Every day there are opportunities to improve your health. You just need to take them.



CAPRICORN DECEMBER 22-JANUARY 19

Get a load of you! You're at level 10 of everything today: brains, wit, energy, and organisation! This would be a great day to work on a major cleaning or restructuring. It's high time you got rid of that dead weight or those unused resources weighing you down. Your clarity on what's valuable and what isn't can't be beat, so trust yourself. Get a fresh start on an old routine and you'll be primed for success.



GEMINI MAY 21-JUNE 21

No matter how tempting it might be to make one last push toward the finish line, try not to force things. You're right where you need to be right now, no matter how impatient you may be to get to the next level. Not everyone is on the same timetable as you, and you need to be mindful of that. Wait for your partners to catch up to where you are. Once everyone is ready to take the next step together, the path will be clear and easy.



LIBRA SEPTEMBER 23-OCTOBER 22

Isn't it amazing that when you finally get around to cleaning out your closet you end up throwing out much more than you ever knew you had? Make a pledge to yourself that you'll never let your unused possessions pile up like that again! Today, clean out your emotional closet. Many feelings, grudges, or regrets are in there and they're doing you no good. Let these outmoded things pass away. You'll be amazed by how much lighter you feel.



AQUARIUS JANUARY 20-FEBRUARY 18

Your emotional and the intellectual intelligence is cranked up today. It's so high, in fact, that you're able to evaluate any situation in an instant. Trust your first impressions, no matter how much other people try to convince you to change your mind. If a charmer has everyone else fooled, that's their problem. You're not about to join the club of blind followers. Use your brain. It will save you time and a lot of wasted energy.



CANCER JUNE 22-JULY 22

Focus on completing a project. You've been able to enjoy freedom of thought, and good for you for letting your mind wander into new territory. Today, you need to build on the experiences you've had and pinpoint the one thing that deserves your energy. Your mind is as sharp as a razor, and whether the task you choose is as simple as shopping for a birthday present or as complex as revising your finances, you'll complete it quickly.



SCORPIO OCTOBER 23-NOVEMBER 21

Where do you fit into your community? And do you want your role to grow or shrink? Today, these types of questions will be on your mind. As you get older, your sense of connection with the people around you (strangers and friends) is becoming more important. Find out how you can get involved in a neighborhood group, political group, or even a social club of people who share your interests.



PISCES FEBRUARY 19-MARCH 20

This is a day for selfless action. You need to turn away from your personal worries and put yourself at someone else's disposal. Contact a friend who's been going through a tough time and ask them if you can do anything to lighten their load. Your gestures of compassion are powerful tools you can use to grow your relationship. Now is not the time to keep track of the favours you grant. It will all come back to you.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE

1. The measurement of Lawn Tennis court for singles

- a. 70 ft. by 26 ft.
b. 78 ft. by 27 ft.
c. 70 ft. by 30 ft.
d. 78 ft. by 38 ft.

2. The main credit of the concept of Non-aligned Movement goes to

- a. Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, India
b. Marshal Tito - President of Yugoslavia
c. Dr. Sukarno - President of Indonesia
d. G. A. Nassir - President of Egypt

3. The headquarter of the United Nations is at

- a. Geneva
b. Paris
c. New York
d. Washington, D.C

Answers: 1. b 2 a 3 c

VOX CINEMAS

BLOCKBUSTERS ARE BACK

WHERE THEY BELONG

Witness the magic of movies the way they were meant to be seen...on the big screen

Sing 2
Buster Moon and his friends must persuade reclusive rock star Clay Calloway to join them for the opening of a new show

Radioactive
Pioneer – Rebel – Genius | Don't miss Rosamund Pike in the incredible, true-story of Marie Curie and her Nobel Prize-winning work that changed the world.

Al Mahkma
Over the course of one day, the events revolve around a number of cases that take place inside a court, and how the people involved try to deal with them and solve their problems

Father Christmas is Back
Father Christmas is Back centers around four sisters who have re-united for the Christmas Holiday in a Yorkshire mansion.

Book your tickets at voxcinemas.com or the VOX app

BOGGLER

M	A	D	E
R	R	S	T
C	B	P	D
A	U	O	T

Each game will present you with a matrix filled with letters. The objective is to form words by linking adjacent letters - to the left, right, on top, bottom, or diagonal to each other. The Boggles Classic game uses a 4 x 4 matrix. Words are valued at one point for each letter in excess of two letters. A three letter word is worth one point, a four letter word is worth two points, and so on. Valid words must be at least three letters long.

Solution 20-25 words: Excellent, 15-20 words: Very good, 10-15 words: Good, 5-10 words: Average

DO YOU SUDOKU?

LEVEL EASY: Fill in the grid so that every row, every column and every 3x3 box contains the digits 1 to 9 and only one instance of each number

3		5						2
9			1					
4			5	2	8			3
				7			1	
1		3	9		6	2		7
	7			5				
5	4		6	3	2			8
					7			5
7						4		3

WORD BUILDER

You have three minutes to find all the words contained in this word.

Rules: Words should be at least four letters long, proper nouns and duplicates don't count

SUDOKU EASY ANSWER

8	6	4	5	1	8	9	2	7
5	2	9	7	6	4	1	8	3
8	7	1	2	8	9	6	4	5
6	8	3	1	5	2	7	4	9
7	4	2	9	8	6	3	5	1
9	1	6	4	7	5	8	9	2
1	8	6	3	2	5	7	4	9
7	5	4	3	7	1	9	2	8
2	9	8	6	7	1	5	3	4

US hits Iranian officials with new sanctions

The sanctions singled out officials and entities involved in crackdowns on protests in 2009 and 2019

Washington, US - The United States slapped fresh sanctions on a dozen Iranian officials and entities for 'serious' human rights abuses on Tuesday, ahead of the expected resumption of nuclear talks with Tehran after they halted last week without any concrete progress.

The sanctions announced by the Treasury and State Department targeted government officials and organisations involved in the repression of protesters and political activists, and prisons where activists have been held in brutal conditions.

The Treasury also placed several Syrian officials on its sanctions blacklist for their roles in political repression and chemical gas attacks, and Uganda's military intelligence chief was hit with sanctions for extreme abuse of people arrested for their nationality or political beliefs.

The announcement came ahead of the Washington-hosted Summit for Democracy later this week, billed as a push to promote more free and open societies.

"The United States is committed to promoting democracy and accountability for those who abuse human rights around the world," said Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a statement.

"The United States will utilise its full range of tools to highlight and disrupt these abuses of



Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi delivers a speech during a parliament session on the occasion of the Parliament Day, in Tehran on December 1 (AFP)

human rights," he said.

The Iranian sanctions singled out officials and entities involved in brutal crackdowns on protests in 2009 and 2019, including Hassan Karami, the commander of the LEF Special Units, which

are focused on crowd control and protest suppression, the Treasury said.

Also named was Gholamreza Soleimani, who commands the Basij, the country's Islamic militia also involved in the deadly 2009

and 2019 crackdowns.

The Syrians blacklisted included two air force major generals, Tawfiq Muhammad Khadour and Muhammad Youssef al Hasouri, who the Treasury said were responsible

for chemical gas attacks that killed numerous civilians in 2017 and 2018.

Security officials considered responsible for other harsh attacks on opponents of the regime of Syrian President

The United States is committed to promoting democracy and accountability for those who abuse human rights around the world

ANTONY BLINKEN

Bashar Assad were also named.

"These senior officials and the organisations they are associated with have imprisoned hundreds of thousands of Syrians who peacefully called for change. Moreover, at least 14,000 prisoners in Syria have allegedly died as a result of torture," the Treasury said.

The Ugandan hit with sanctions was the commander of the Chiefcy of Military Intelligence, Maj Gen Abel Kandiho.

People arrested by Kandiho's bureau 'were subjected to horrific beatings and other egregious acts by [military intelligence] officials, including sexual abuse and electrocutions, often resulting in significant long-term injury and even death,' the Treasury said.

The US Treasury 'will continue to defend against authori-

tarianism, promoting accountability for violent repression of people seeking to exercise their human rights and fundamental freedoms', said Andrea Gacki, head of the Treasury's sanctions office.

The expansion of the broad US sanctions on Tehran came after the first direct negotiations on limiting Iran's nuclear programme in five months failed to make headway, with both sides blaming the other for unwillingness to give ground.

But talks are to resume on Thursday, Tehran's main negotiator said during a visit to Moscow.

"I deemed it necessary at this stage to consult the Russian authorities in order to continue the talks in a constructive atmosphere," Ali Bagheri, Tehran's chief nuclear negotiator, said on Tuesday according to Iranian state television's Iribnews website.

A US official was cautious about the next round. "We are much less concerned about the when, and much more concerned about... whether Iran comes back to Vienna prepared to engage in good faith, prepared to engage sincerely, and steadfastly as we are," the official told reporters on grounds of anonymity.

AFP



A file photo of Jamal Khashoggi (AFP)

France releases Jamal Khashoggi suspect, admits identity mistaken

Paris, France - French authorities said on Wednesday they had released a man arrested on suspicion of playing a role in the 2018 Istanbul murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, after realising he was not the same individual on an arrest warrant issued by Turkey.

The man, bearing a passport in the name of Khalid al Otaibi, was arrested by French border police at Paris's main airport on Tuesday as he prepared to board a flight to Riyadh, police and judicial sources said.

A man named Khalid al Otaibi is one of the 26 being tried in absentia in Turkey for being part of the hit squad that carried out Khashoggi's murder at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. He has also been sanctioned by the US Treasury for his role in the killing.

"In-depth verifications to determine the identity of this person have enabled us to establish that the warrant was not applicable to him," the chief prosecutor in Paris said in a statement, confirming the man had been arrested on the basis of a Turkish arrest warrant issued in November 2018.

"He has been released," the prosecutor added.

While authorities checked his identity, the Saudi Embassy in Paris issued a statement late on Tuesday saying that the man arrested 'has nothing to do with the case in question' and demanding

his immediate release.

A security source in Saudi Arabia added that 'Khalid al Otaibi' was a very common name in the kingdom, and that the Otaibi the French thought they were holding was actually serving time in prison in Saudi Arabia along with 'all the defendants in the case'.

No Saudi official has ever faced justice in person in Turkey for the killing, with all the suspects there tried in absentia.

"The Saudi judiciary has issued verdicts against all those who took part in the heinous murder of Jamal Khashoggi, all of them are currently serving their sentences," the Paris Embassy said.

Khashoggi - a prominent Saudi who lived in self-exile in the United States and wrote for *The Washington Post* - entered the Saudi consulate in Istanbul on October 2, 2018 to file paperwork to marry his Turkish fiancée.

According to US and Turkish officials, a waiting Saudi hit squad strangled him and dismembered his body, which has never been retrieved.

On the third anniversary of the killing, Khashoggi's widow Hatice Cengiz, who was waiting outside the consulate while the murder took place, accused the US of failing to hold Saudi Arabia accountable.

AFP

Palestinian teen arrested from school on suspicion of stabbing Israeli woman

Jerusalem - Israeli police arrested a 14-year-old Palestinian girl from a school in annexed East Jerusalem Wednesday on suspicion of stabbing an Israeli woman in the back, police said.

The attack took place in the flashpoint Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood, where Israeli settlers have been mounting legal campaigns to expel Palestinian residents whose homes belonged to Jews before the 1948 war for Israel's independence.

'At the end of a police manhunt that included searches of the ground with the help of a police helicopter, the suspect in the act, a 14-year-old resident of the area, was located inside an educational institution located hundreds of metres from the attack,' a police statement said.

The victim (26) was walking with her children at the time of the attack, police said.

She was admitted to Hadasah Hospital Mount Scopus with a 30-centimetre-long knife in her back, said director of general surgery Haggi Mazeh. He described her condition as 'mild' and said she could be discharged later in the day.



Israeli security forces arrest a young woman (centre) from a school following a reported stabbing attack in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood in Israeli-annexed East Jerusalem on Wednesday (AFP)

Police fanned out in Sheikh Jarrah after the 7:30am (0530 GMT) stabbing. They said they also detained 'a number of women surrounding the suspect' at the time of her arrest.

At least seven Palestinian families in Sheikh Jarrah are waiting for an Israeli legal ruling on whether they must surrender

their homes to Jewish settlers in a case that exploded into 11 days of bloody conflict in and around the Gaza Strip in May.

Israeli law in Jerusalem allows Israeli Jews to reclaim property lost in 1948. No similar rights exist for Palestinians who fled their homes at the same time.

The stabbing is the latest in a series of 'lone wolf' attacks in East Jerusalem and the occupied West Bank in recent weeks by individuals who do not appear to have ties to established militant groups.

On Monday, a Palestinian teen rammed his car into an Israeli checkpoint in the West

The victim was admitted to the hospital with a 30-centimetre-long knife in her back

HAGGI MAZEH

Bank. A security guard shot him dead, Israeli authorities said.

On Saturday, a Palestinian man stabbed an Israeli civilian and attempted to attack police near the Old City. Officers shot the assailant and appeared to continue firing after he lay on the ground incapacitated.

Palestinians accused Israel of excessive force, while Israel said officers who killed the attacker followed protocol.

Last month, an Israeli civilian was killed and three people wounded when a Palestinian gunman opened fire in Jerusalem's Old City in a rare shooting attack by a militant of Palestinian Islamist group Hamas, which controls the Gaza Strip.

AFP

Rights groups demand Lebanon release US journalist

Beirut, Lebanon - Lebanese authorities should release a US journalist detained 'arbitrarily' on unclear charges, rights groups said on Wednesday, condemning what they said were increasingly frequent attacks on press freedom.

Nada Homsi, a freelance journalist currently working with National Public Radio (NPR), was arrested by General Security on November 16 following a raid on her apartment that took place without a judicial order, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (HRW) said in a joint statement.

General Security, the coun-

try's top security body, denied her access to a lawyer and issued a deportation order against her despite the public prosecutor demanding her release on November 25, they said.

"General Security's refusal to release Homsi despite the public prosecution's order is a blatant abuse of power and a very worrying indication of the security agency's lack of respect for the rule of law," said Aya Majzoub, Lebanon researcher at HRW.

The reasons behind the raid on Homsi's apartment and her continued detention remain



US journalist Nada Homsi

largely unclear. Homsi's lawyer Diala

Chehade said that a small amount of cannabis was found at Homsi's apartment during the raid, according to the statement.

Chehade said General Security officers insist that Homsi is being detained 'for security reasons' but do not elaborate on what these might be, the statement said.

Homsi has been charged for drug consumption, a violation that does not necessarily entail prison time if the accused agrees to receive treatment, Amnesty and HRW said.

Journalists working in Lebanon have increasingly

come under attack by authorities that have resorted to the country's courts and security agencies to silence and punish critics, according to rights groups.

On November 26, the military court sentenced journalist Radwan Murtada, a reporter at Lebanon's Al-Akhbar daily, to 13 months in prison for allegedly insulting the military.

Last month, the Committee to Protect Journalists called on authorities to drop Murtada's prosecution, saying the army 'has no business trying and sentencing a journalist'.

AFP

India defence chief among 13 killed in helicopter crash

Coonoor, India - Indian defence chief General Bipin Rawat was among 13 people killed in a helicopter crash on Wednesday, raising questions over the future of military reforms he was leading.

Rawat was India's first Chief of Defence Staff, a position that the government established in 2019, and was seen as close to Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The 63-year-old was travelling with his wife and other senior officers in the Russian-made Mi-17 chopper, which crashed near its destination in southern Tamil Nadu state.

Modi said Rawat was an outstanding soldier and 'true patriot' who had helped modernise the country's armed forces.

'His passing away has saddened me deeply,' the Prime Minister wrote on Twitter. 'India will never forget his exceptional service.'

Strategic analyst and author Brahma Chellaney tweeted that Rawat's death 'couldn't have come at a worse time' when 'China's 20-month-long border aggression has resulted in a war-like situation along the Himalayan front'.

Footage from the crash showed a crowd of people trying to extinguish the fiery wreck with water buckets while a group of soldiers carried one of the passengers away on an improvised stretcher.

Rawat was headed to the Defence Services Staff College (DSSC) to address students and faculty from the nearby Sullur air force base in Coimbatore.

The chopper was already making its descent at the time of the crash and came down around 10km from the nearest main road, forcing emergency workers to trek to the accident site, a fire official said.

An eyewitness at the scene said he had seen passengers falling from the helicopter before the crash, and that one person had crawled out from the wreck-



Firemen and rescue workers stand next to the debris of an IAF Mi-17V5 helicopter crash site in Coonoor, Tamil Nadu on Wednesday (AFP)



A file photo shows the then 27th Chief of Army Staff Bipin Rawat boarding in the co-pilot seat of a Light Combat Aircraft of the Indian Airforce during the Aero India airshow at the Yelahanka Air Force station in Bangalore (AFP)

age. The sole survivor, a captain working at the DSSC, was being treated for his injuries at a nearby military hospital, the air force said.

Rawat was chief of the 1.3mn-strong army from 2017 to 2019

before his elevation to defence services chief, which analysts said was to improve coordination between the army, navy and air force.

"He had given a tremendous push to the integration of the

three services, so his successor has big shoes to fill," retired Lt Gen D S Hooda, a former head of the Indian army's Northern Command, said.

"He had a tough job... we will need someone to give the same

impetus that he had given so that the reforms that he started continue at the same pace."

Career officer

Rawat came from a military family with several generations having served in the Indian armed forces.

The general joined the army as a second lieutenant in 1978 and had four decades of service behind him, having commanded forces in Indian-administered Kashmir and along the Line of Actual Control bordering China.

He was credited with reducing insurgency on India's north-eastern frontier and supervised a cross-border counter-insurgency operation into neighbouring Myanmar.

The Mi-17 helicopter, which first entered service in the 1970s and is in wide use by defence services around the world, has been involved in a number of accidents over the years.

India's air force said an inquiry was under way into the accident. AFP

Scholz takes reins from Merkel for new German era

Berlin, Germany - Olaf Scholz became Germany's new chancellor on Wednesday after 16 years with Angela Merkel at the helm, pledging his centre-left-led coalition would offer a 'new beginning' for Europe's top economy.

Scholz was officially named the country's ninth post-war leader by President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, who urged him to 'ensure that the pandemic does not keep us firmly in its grip for another year' as a fourth wave of the coronavirus outbreak rages.

The former finance minister, who won 395 of the 707 votes cast in the Bundestag lower house, has vowed broad 'continuity' with the popular Merkel while making Germany greener and fairer.

"It will be a new beginning for our country," Scholz pledged as he officially assumed the office from Merkel and thanked her for her lengthy tenure.

"I will do everything to work towards that."

Merkel wished Scholz luck as chancellor, urging him to 'take this office and work in the best interest of our country'.

She then left office by motorcade for the last time as her staff looked on, applauding.

Scholz led his Social Democrats from a deep poll deficit to victory in the September 26 election.

The 63-year-old, who turned emulating Merkel in style and substance into a winning strategy, forged Germany's first national 'traffic light' coalition with the ecologist Greens and the liberal Free Democrats, nicknamed after the parties' colours.

Their four-year pact sealed late last month is called 'Dare for More Progress', a hat tip to Social Democratic chancellor Willy Brandt's historic 1969 pledge to 'Dare for More Democracy'.

The alliance aims to slash carbon emissions, overhaul decrepit digital infrastructure, modernise citizenship laws, lift the mini-



Olaf Scholz poses with his certificate of appointment as Germany's new Chancellor on Wednesday (AFP)

mum wage and have Germany join a handful of countries worldwide in legalising marijuana.

French President Emmanuel Macron congratulated Scholz, pledging 'we will write the next chapter together' while EU chief Ursula von der Leyen said she looked forward to cooperation for a 'strong Europe'.

Scholz's office announced his first official visit would take him to Paris and Brussels on Friday for talks with Macron, von der Leyen and NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg.

Vladimir Putin said Russia was offering 'constructive ties' with the new government, while China's Xi Jinping said Beijing was willing to work with Scholz to 'promote bilateral ties to a new level'.

The new Foreign Minister, Annalena Baerbock, has pledged a tougher line with authoritarian states such as Russia and China after the business-driven pragmatism of the Merkel years.

Greens co-leader Baerbock is one of eight women in Germany's first gender-balanced Cabinet.

"That corresponds to the society we live in - half of the power belongs to women," Scholz, who describes himself as a 'feminist', said this week.

AFP

20 students sentenced to death for political murder in Bangladesh

Dhaka, Bangladesh - Bangladesh sentenced 20 university students to death on Wednesday for the 2019 murder of a young man who criticised the government on social media.

The battered body of Abrar Fahad (21) was found in his dormitory hours after he wrote a Facebook post slamming Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina for signing a water-sharing deal with India.

He was beaten with a cricket bat and other blunt objects for six hours by 25 fellow students who were members of the ruling Awami League's student wing, the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL).

"I am happy with the verdict," Fahad's father Barkat Ullah told reporters outside court after the sentencing. "I hope the punishments will be served soon."

The remaining five perpetrators were handed life terms.

All those given death sentences were between 20 and 22 years old at the time of the murder and attended the elite Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology alongside Fahad.

Three of the defendants are still at large while the rest were in the courtroom.

Faruque Ahmed, a lawyer for some of the defendants, said the sentence would be appealed.



Abrar Fahad

"I am very disappointed at the verdict. It is not fair," he told AFP. "They are young men and some of the best students of the country. They were sentenced to death despite no proper evidence against some of them."

'Highest punishment'

Fahad had put up a post on Facebook that went viral hours before his death.

In it, he criticised the government for signing an accord that allowed India to take water from a river that lies on the boundary the two countries share.

Fahad had been seen - in leaked CCTV footage that went viral on social media - walking into a dormitory with some BCL activists.

About six hours later, his body

was carried out by the students and laid on the ground.

Protests in the days after Fahad's murder called for the attackers to be harshly punished and for the BCL to be banned.

Hasina vowed soon afterwards that the killers would get the 'highest punishment'.

The country's Justice Minister Anisul Huq said the verdict showed that 'nobody will be able to walk freely after committing such crimes'.

Chhatra Odhikhar Parishad, a leading student group, held a demonstration to praise the verdict and demand quick execution of the death sentences.

"The verdict is the victory of the people," said Akram Hossain, the group's general secretary.

The BCL has earned notoriety in recent years after some of its members were accused of killing, violence and extortion.

In 2018, its members allegedly used violence to suppress a major anti-government student protest.

Those rallies were sparked by anger over road safety after a student was killed by a speeding bus.

Death sentences are common in Bangladesh with hundreds of people on death row. All executions are by hanging, a legacy of the British colonial era.

AFP

WHO and US scientists say Omicron no worse than other coronavirus variants

Geneva, Switzerland - The Omicron variant appears to be no worse than other coronavirus strains, top scientists from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United States told AFP, while cautioning that more research is needed to judge its severity.

The hopeful assessments came as global concern grew over the heavily mutated variant, which has forced dozens of nations to re-impose border restrictions and raised the possibility of a return to economically punishing lockdowns.

While it is likely more transmissible than previous variants, 'the preliminary data don't indicate that this is more severe', the WHO's second-in-command told AFP.

"In fact, if anything, the direction is towards less severity," WHO emergencies director Michael Ryan said in an interview on Tuesday, insisting though that more research was needed.

Ryan also said it was 'highly unlikely' that Omicron could fully sidestep protections provided by existing COVID-19 vaccines.

"We have highly effective vaccines that have proved effective against all the variants so far, in terms of severe disease and hospitalisation... There's no reason to expect that it wouldn't be



This photograph shows a syringe and a screen displaying the SARS-Cov-2 mains variants - Alpha, Beta, Delta, Gamma and Omicron (AFP)

so" for Omicron, he added, pointing to initial data from South Africa, where the strain was first reported.

However, Ryan acknowledged that it was possible that existing vaccines might prove less effective against Omicron, which counts more than 30 mutations on the spike protein that dots the surface of the coronavirus and allows it to invade cells.

Top US scientist Anthony Fauci echoed the WHO's view, saying Omicron did not appear worse than prior strains based on early indications - and was possibly milder.

The new variant is 'clearly highly transmissible', very likely more so than Delta, the current dominant global strain, Fauci

said.

"It almost certainly is not more severe than Delta," he said. "There is some suggestion that it might even be less severe."

But he noted it was important to not over-interpret the data because the populations being followed skewed young and were less likely to become hospitalised. Severe disease can also take weeks to develop.

"Then, as we get more infections throughout the rest of the world, it might take longer to see what's the level of severity."

Global concern

The detection of the first Omicron cases two weeks ago coincided with surges in infection numbers across the world, and

the variant added fuel to concerns about a global COVID-19 resurgence.

Omicron has so far been found in 57 countries around the world, the WHO said. No deaths have yet been associated with the variant.

Ryan stressed the need for all countries to help detect Omicron cases and research its behaviour.

"The more and better data we collect in the next two weeks, [the better chances] of a clear conclusion regarding the implications of this variant," he said.

As European Union health ministers met on Tuesday to find ways to coordinate their response, Norway announced it will tighten restrictions to combat its surge.

A suspected outbreak of Omicron last week among dozens of partygoers who had all been vaccinated led to new restrictions in and around the capital Oslo.

Neighbouring Sweden also said on Tuesday it would launch a series of anti-COVID-19 measures.

Scientists and health experts say vaccinations and continued social distancing remain key to defeating all variants of the virus, including Omicron.

"The virus hasn't changed its nature," Ryan said. "The rules of the game are still the same."

AFP

Cummins 'dream start' as England slump to 147

In his first match as Test captain, Pat Cummins claimed 5-38, while Starc took 2-35, Hazlewood 2-42

Brisbane, Australia - Pat Cummins took five wickets in a scintillating start to his captaincy as Australia routed England for 147 on the opening day of the Ashes at the Gabba on Wednesday.

After England skipper Joe Root won the toss and opted to bat, the Australian pace bowling trio of Cummins, Mitchell Starc and Josh Hazlewood ran riot to bundle the tourists out in just 50.1 overs.

Cummins, in his first game as Test captain since taking over from Tim Paine, claimed 5-38, while Starc took 2-35 and Hazlewood 2-42 as the English batters failed to adapt to the bounce and movement of a Gabba green top.

England made a disastrous start to the series when they lost Rory Burns to the first ball of the match, Starc bowling the left-hander around his legs.

David Malan, who scored six, and Root, for a duck, quickly followed as a shell-shocked England slumped to 11-3.

"It was a dream start really - it wasn't a bad toss to lose and I thought we all bowled really well and did our jobs," Cummins said.

"To keep them to 150 was a tremendous start. I was really proud of how consistent and composed everyone was.

"Personally, it was nice to get a couple of wickets at the end to make it a five-for - it was just a really good start."

Cummins chimed in to remove the dangerous Ben Stokes for five and leave England struggling on 59-4 at lunch, on a hot and humid Brisbane morning.

It was only a momentary respite. In the first over after the interval Haseeb Hameed edged Cummins to Steve Smith at second slip to leave England teetering at 60-5.

Jos Buttler came out and



Australian Captain Pat Cummins (centre) celebrates after taking a wicket during the day one of the first Ashes match, in Brisbane on Wednesday (AFP)



Mitchell Starc of Australia (left) celebrates taking the wicket of England's Rory Burns in the very first ball of the first Ashes cricket Test match between England and Australia at the Gabba, in Brisbane on Wednesday (AFP)

launched a fightback with a glittering array of attacking shots to put the Australian attack on the back foot for the first time.

However, with the score on 112, Buttler - who had reached 39 - feathered a catch to debutant wicketkeeper Alex Carey.

Six runs later, Ollie Pope was caught at deep fine leg for 35 to give Cameron Green his first Test wicket.

England's flimsy challenge was all but over, despite some late hitting from Chris Woakes, who was last man out for 21 as Cummins mopped up the tail.

Pope said England had failed

to adapt to the conditions swiftly enough.

"They bowled very well and the steepness of the bounce you get at the Gabba - the pitch felt quite soft and I think that tennis-ball bounce probably dragged a few shots that you don't have to play," Pope said.

"It's probably the adjustments you have to make on a day-one Gabba pitch that we didn't make quickly enough."

Pope said it was imperative that England bowled at the same level as their arch-rivals when play resumes on Thursday, the day's action having ended pre-

maturely after heavy rain.

"I think it will quicken up and the nicks will definitely carry so if we put it in the right areas early, hopefully we can make some early inroads," he said.

Earlier Root had taken the brave decision to bat in the bowler-friendly conditions.

Brisbane has been experiencing a wet start to the summer, washing out most of the tourists' scheduled warm-up games.

Having had little chance to become acclimatised to the conditions, England's top order struggled badly with the pace and movement of the Australian

SCOREBOARD		
ENGLAND 1 ST INNINGS		
Rory Burns	b Starc	0
H Hameed	c Smith b Cummins	25
David Malan	c Carey b Hazlewood	6
Joe Root	c Warner b Hazlewood	0
Ben Stokes	c Labuschagne	
	b Cummins	5
Ollie Pope	c Hazlewood b Green	35
Jos Buttler	c Carey b Starc	39
Chris Woakes	c Hazlewood	
	b Cummins	21
O Robinson	c Carey b Cummins	0
Mark Wood	c Harris b Cummins	8
Jack Leach	not out	2
Extras:	(lb 5, w 1)	6
TOTAL:	147 all out in 50.1 overs	
Fall of wickets: 1-0, 2-11, 3-11, 4-29, 5-60, 6-112, 7-118, 8-122, 9-144, 10-147		
Bowling: Mitchell Starc 12-2-35-2, Josh Hazlewood 13-4-42-2, Pat Cummins 13.1-3-38-5, Nathan Lyon 9-2-21-0, Cameron Green 3-1-6-1		

attack. The crowd of just over 30,000 were barely settled in their seats when Starc clean-bowled Burns behind the left-hander's legs with a full, swinging delivery that should have been defended.

It was only the second time in Ashes history that a wicket had fallen on the first ball of the series. The only previous victim was England's Stan Worthington in 1936, also in Brisbane.

England, already missing the rested Jimmy Anderson, made the surprise decision to leave out veteran seamer Stuart Broad.

AFF



India's Mayank Agarwal plays a shot on the third day of the second Test match against New Zealand, in Mumbai on December 5 (AFP)

Mayank Agarwal, Ajaz Patel rise in Test rankings

Ajaz Patel, who became only the third bowler in the history of Test cricket to pick up all ten wickets in an innings, against India in Mumbai, has risen to No 38 following a match haul of 14 for 225.

New Zealand still lost the Test by a record 372 runs, and India opener Mayank Agarwal, the Player of the Match for innings of 150 and 62, has jumped 30 positions to No. 11, just one off a career-high tenth spot. For Ajaz, who emulated Jim Laker and Anil Kumble at the Wankhede, it meant a gain of 23 spots; his previous highest was No. 53, and he had started the two-Test series against India, which New Zealand lost 1-0, at 62nd place. He picked up a total of 17 wickets in the series.

As for Agarwal, his previous best rankings of No. 10 came back in November 2019, after he had scored 243 against Bangladesh in Indore in what was his eighth Test.

R Ashwin was named Player of the Series for his tally of 14 wickets in two Tests, to go with 70 runs across three innings. Ashwin, No. 2 on the bowlers' chart behind Pat Cummins, has now moved

within 25 points of the Australian quick, his 883 rating points well clear of third-placed Josh Hazlewood, who has 816 points.

Cummins, however, has started the Ashes series with a bang, returning 5 for 38 on the opening day of the first Test in Brisbane as England rolled over for 147. Hazlewood hasn't done badly either, picking up 2 for 42.

Ashwin has also moved up one place to No. 2 among all-rounders. Jason Holder is top of the tally there, while Ravindra Jadeja has dropped from second to fourth, with Ben Stokes between him and Ashwin. Holder, meanwhile, has also moved up one spot to the 14th place among bowlers at the end of the second Galle Test against Sri Lanka, which the home side won by 164 runs to complete a 2-0 series win.

Among the others to gain at the end of the India vs New Zealand series were Shubman Gill, up 21 places to 45th, and Daryl Mitchell, up 26 places to No. 78, on the batters' table, and Mohammed Siraj, who moved up four spots to 41st in the bowlers' list.

Cricinfo



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Pakistan win thriller

- Sajid and Pakistan rage against the dying light to snatch victory
- The off-spinner took his 12th wicket of the match to seal victory on the final day



Pakistan captain Babar Azam (left) receives the tournament trophy, in Dhaka on Wednesday (AFP)

Dhaka, Bangladesh - What might have been a routine win turned into a fifth evening thriller in Dhaka, with Pakistan sealing an innings win moments before bad light was set to draw the curtains on the second Test match between these two sides.

Fittingly, it was Sajid Khan who ended the day as he'd begun it - by trapping Taijul Islam in front. It was his 12th wicket of the game, and as Pakistan raged against the dying of the light, they found themselves rewarded with a Test match win, and 12 crucial World Test Championship points.

Bangladesh looked as if they might just hold on after all in the final session when Shakib al Hasan - who scored a battling, valiant 63 - and Mehidy Hasan Miraz saw off the first hour of the final session without incident.

But Babar Azam - don't read-just your reading glasses - provided Pakistan with a breakthrough out of thin air as he coaxed Mehidy into a sweep that didn't connect, Pakistan succeeding with the review to have

him trapped in front.

Soon after, Shakib, who played two very different innings in the last 24 hours or so, paid for a possible lapse in concentration as he played inside the line of a quicker one from Sajid.

There was still time enough in the game, and Pakistan had burrowed their way into the tail. The great heist was on, and even more when Khaled Ahmed feathered one to Mohammad Rizwan. Pakistan were suddenly just one wicket away. At the same time, Bangladesh were creeping up to the magical 213 mark, at which Pakistan would be forced to bat again. With light soon poor enough to rule the fast bowlers out of the contest, Bangladesh would likely only need nine more runs to effectively seal a draw.

Taijul and Ebadot Hossain decided against that option, preferring to block their way through until light came to their rescue. A frantic Babar whizzed through his bowling options; while Sajid was a fixture from one end, Shaheen Shah Afridi, Nauman Ali and even

Babar himself turned their arm over from the other. But it was Sajid who had the final say as Taijul found himself struck in front, with the review failing to provide the stunned hosts any respite.

A sensational bowling performance by Sajid last night was topped up by three early wickets for Pakistan - eight in the innings for Sajid - to bowl Bangladesh out for 87. That meant, with a lead of 213, Pakistan could enforce the follow-on, and the visitors weren't done yet. Much as Pakistan have done almost all tour, they ripped through the top order, Afridi and Hasan Ali sending the top four back to the pavilion in under nine overs.

With Shakib partnering with Mushfiquir for handy partnership, combining for 49. Mushfiquir battled on while Shakib opted for a more conventional, sedate approach compared to his high-risk strokeplay in the first innings.

After this, it was a frenetic final session for Pakistan to seal the win.

Cricinfo

SCOREBOARD	
Pakistan 1st Innings 300 for 4 decl	
BANGLADESH 1 st INNINGS	
S Islam	c H n Ali b S Khan 3
M Hasan Joy	c B Azam b S Khan 0
N H Shanto	lbw b S Khan 30
M Haque	run out 1
M Rahim	c F Alam b S Khan 5
L Das	c & b S Khan 6
S Al Hasan	c A Ali b S Khan 33
M H Miraz	b S Khan 0
Taijul Islam	lbw b S Khan 0
K Ahmed	b S Shah Afridi 0
E Hossain	not out 0
Extras:	(b 5, lb 3, nb 1) 9
TOTAL:	87 all out in 32 overs
Fall of wickets: 1-1, 2-20, 3-22, 4-31, 5-46, 6-65, 7-71, 8-76, 9-77, 10-87	
Bowling: S S Afridi 4-3-3-1, N Ali 12-2-33-0, S Khan 15-4-42-8, B Azam 1-0-1-0	
BANGLADESH 2 nd INNINGS	
S Islam	lbw b S S Afridi 2
M Hasan Joy	b Hasan Ali 6
N H Shanto	c F Alam b S S Afridi 6
M Haque	lbw b Hasan Ali 7
M Rahim	run out 48
Liton Das	c F Alam b S Khan 45
S Al Hasan	b S Khan 63
M H Miraz	lbw b Babar Azam 14
Taijul Islam	lbw b Sajid Khan 5
K Ahmed	c M Rizwan b S Khan 0
E Hossain	not out 9
Extras:	(b 8, lb 1) 9
TOTAL:	205 all out in 84.4 overs
Fall of wickets: 1-12, 2-12, 3-19, 4-25, 5-98, 6-147, 7-198, 8-200, 9-204, 10-205	
Bowling: S S Afridi 15-5-31-2, H Ali 11-3-37-2, N Ali 20-5-41-0, F Ashraf 4-4-0-0, S Khan 32.4-8-86-4, B Azam 2-1-1-1	

Atletico qualify, Liverpool complete group stage

Paris, France - Atletico Madrid won a bad-tempered game in Porto on Tuesday to qualify for the last 16 of the Champions League as Liverpool and Ajax both completed the group stage with 100 per cent records.

Diego Simeone's Atletico, who lost to Real Madrid in the 2014 and 2016 finals, needed to beat Porto in Portugal to advance to the knockout phase and they duly triumphed 3-1 in a game which featured three red cards.

Antoine Griezmann put the Spanish champions ahead in the 56th minute at the Estadio do Dragao but they then had Yannick Carrasco sent off for wrestling Otavio to the ground.

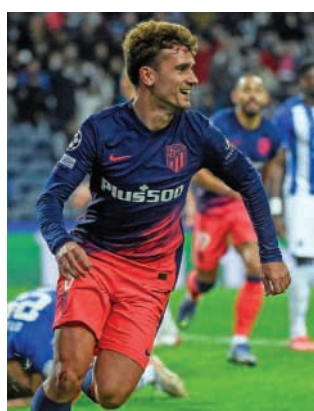
With tempers flaring, Porto were also reduced to 10 men as Wendell was sent off for elbowing Atletico's Matheus Cunha in the neck, before their substitute goalkeeper Agustin Marchesin also saw red.

With Porto pushing forward in search of the draw they needed to qualify, Atletico got their second goal on the break in the last minute through Angel Correa before Rodrigo De Paul scored their third in injury time. Sergio Oliveira's penalty was a mere consolation for Porto.

Atletico finish second in Group B, a huge 11 points behind group winners Liverpool, who made it six wins out of six in Europe this season by beating AC Milan 2-1 at San Siro despite fielding a vir-



Liverpool's forward Divock Origi (top left) and AC Milan's goalkeeper Mike Maignan go for the ball during their league match on Tuesday (AFP)



Atletico Madrid's Antoine Griezmann celebrates a goal (AFP)

tual reserve side. Milan had to win to stand a chance of going through and they went ahead midway through the first half through Fikayo Tomori.

Mohamed Salah did start for the visitors and he equalised in the 36th minute before Divock Origi - who scored a stoppage-

time winner in the Premier League at the weekend - made it 2-1 10 minutes into the second half, heading in after Sadio Mane's shot was saved.

"It's an exceptional performance," said manager Jurgen Klopp. "With that many changes, the boys have to be confident enough to show how good they are. I saw so many good things tonight, it was unbelievable."

Milan finish bottom of the group in their first Champions League campaign since 2013-14, with Porto parachuting into the Europa League.

Elsewhere, Real Madrid secured top spot in Group D with a 2-0 defeat of Inter Milan at the Santiago Bernabeu.

Both sides had already qualified for the last 16 and Real just needed a draw to top the group. AFP



Tottenham Hotspur teammates celebrate their second goal during the English Premier League football match against Norwich City (AFP)

Eight Tottenham players test positive for coronavirus: Conte

London, UK - Tottenham manager Antonio Conte on Wednesday said eight players and five members of staff had tested positive for coronavirus and he expected more confirmed cases.

"Eight players and five members of staff," Conte said at a press conference, which was held virtually rather than in person at the club's Hotspur Way training centre. "Every day we are having people with COVID, people who were not positive yesterday. This is not a good situation."

Spurs are due to play a crucial Europa Conference League game

against Rennes on Thursday and UEFA has said the match is due to take place as scheduled.

It remains unclear whether the club will ask for their Premier League match at Brighton on Sunday to be postponed.

Conte was supposed to be joined by Danish midfielder Pierre-Emile Hojbjerg at the pre-match press conference, but instead faced the media on his own. "To speak about football today is impossible," said the Italian. "The latest situation made me very upset," he added.

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Oman Sail, Oman Paralympic Committee declare national team

Muscat - Oman Sail together with the Oman Paralympic Committee officially announced the national para sailing team to represent Oman in various para sailing competitions both at the domestic and international levels, said Oman Sail on Wednesday.

The announcement was made in partnership with bp Oman, in a formal event marking the International Day of Persons with Disability, under the patronage of H E Sheikh Rashid Ahmed al Shamsi, Undersecretary in the Ministry of Social Development.

The event was attended by Dr Khamis Salim al Jabri, CEO of Oman Sail, Eng Mohammed al Najwani, vice president of Wells at bp Oman and Dr Mansoor Sultan al Tauqi, president of the Oman Paralympic Committee, besides members of various sports related associations.

The ceremony highlighted the national team's journey towards success, and their future directions, said Oman Sail in a press statement.

The national team will represent Oman in international competitions such as the Parasailing World Championship 2022 and Paralympic games.

'This outcome was as a result of the Sail Free programme which was first launched in December 2019 introducing persons with disabilities (specially with physical impairment) to the sport of sailing. Since the start of the programme, approximately 150 men and women with disabilities aged 16 to 30 years old



benefited from the programme,' the statement added.

The team members were selected based on their performance in various stages of the programme at both Oman Sail's Sailing Schools in Al Mouj Muscat and Mussanah.

'The members were trained under the highest standards of security and safety with supervision by a group of highly qualified Omani trainers, using the multi-functional RS Venture Connect dinghy which can be quickly configured to suit the needs of each person with their own unique disability,' Oman Sail stated.

"We believe that Paralympic sport promotes inclusivity, diversity and empowerment. This is in line with our aims at bp to provide equal opportunities to Omanis that help develop their skills and capabilities. We look forward to the outcomes of team as they sail across local, regional and international waters," Shamsa al Rawahi, bp Oman social investment manager, was quoted as saying.

Oman Sail CEO Dr Jabri said, "The success we have seen so far with the Sail Free programme shows the potential for Oman to support people with different

strengths and abilities. This programme provided the training, experience and an environment for them to succeed. I am excited to see the launch of the national para sailing team pave the way for athletes across the country to strive towards their goals."

Dr Tauqi, president of the Oman Paralympic Committee, said, "The Sail Free programme has shown its potential to instil self-confidence and many other valuable lifelong skills in persons with disability. We are excited to see the team inspire others as they sail and compete internationally."

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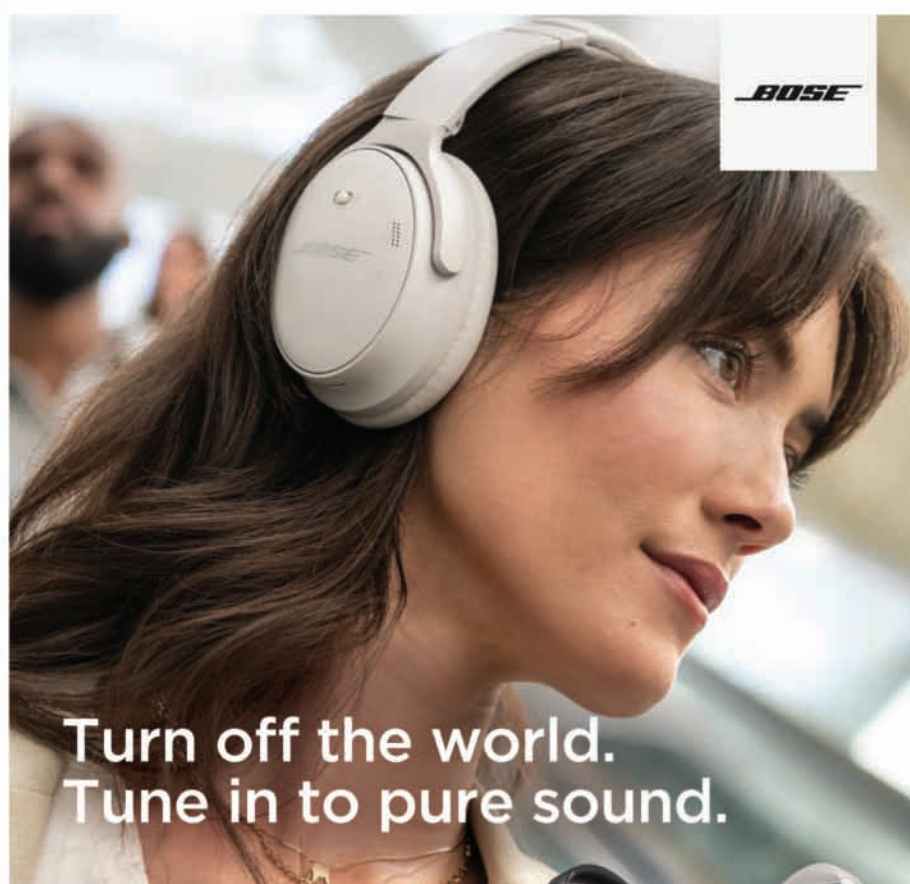
Football legend Pele hospitalised

Sao Paulo, Brazil - Brazilian football legend Pele has been hospitalised for treatment of a previously identified colon tumor, his doctors said on

Wednesday, the latest health problem for the 81-year-old icon.

The three-time world champion was admitted to Albert Einstein Hospital in Sao Paulo 'for

follow-up treatment of the colon tumor identified in September this year', his medical team said, adding the 'the patient is stable'.
AFP



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Mercedes F1 team end controversial deal with Kingspan

London, UK - Formula One team Mercedes announced on Wednesday they had ended their controversial sponsorship deal with a firm linked to the 2017 Grenfell Tower blaze in London, which killed 72 people.

The logo of Kingspan, whose products were used in the building, appeared on Lewis Hamilton's car at the Saudi Arabian Grand Prix on Sunday.

British housing minister Michael Gove and survivors of the fire had criticised Mercedes over the deal with the Irish company that makes insulation and cladding products.

Gove said he was 'deeply disappointed' that Mercedes had signed the deal while an inquiry was ongoing into the tragedy.

Mercedes F1 chief Toto Wolff last week apologised for 'additional hurt' to families of the victims of the disaster but stopped short of saying the team would review the deal.

But Mercedes have now announced they have decided to part ways with Kingspan.

'The Mercedes-AMG Petronas F1 team and Kingspan have announced they have mutually agreed to end their part-

nership,' a statement said.

'Announced last week, the new partnership included Kingspan chairing a new sustainability working group for the team, and aimed to deliver carbon reductions through their leading-edge environmentally sustainable solutions for the team's future campus.

'However, both parties have subsequently concluded that it is not appropriate for the partnership to move forward at the current point in time, notwithstanding its intended positive impact, and we have therefore agreed that it will be discontinued with immediate effect,' the statement added.

Kingspan issued its own statement saying it was "deeply aware of the sensitivities raised in recent days, and so we have jointly agreed that it's not appropriate to move forward at the current point in time".

The firm said it had no role in the Grenfell Tower refurbishment but added: 'The Kingspan Insulation UK business is a core participant in the Grenfell Tower Inquiry and fully supports the inquiry's important work'.
AFP

SPACE TOURISM

JAPANESE ONLINE FASHION TYCOON **YUSAKU MAEZAWA**, WHO FULFILLED A CHERISHED DREAM OF TRAVELLING INTO SPACE, HAS 100 TASKS CHALKED OUT FOR HIS 12-DAY STAY AT THE INTERNATIONAL SPACE STATION



Yusaku Maezawa (C), his assistant Yozo Hirano (top) and Russian cosmonaut Alexander Misurkin board the Soyuz MS-20 spacecraft prior to the launch at the Baikonur cosmodrome on December 8 (AFP)



IN

ORBIT



Japanese billionaire Yusaku Maezawa waves as he boards the Soyuz MS-20 spacecraft prior to the launch at the Baikonur cosmodrome on December 8 (AFP)

A Russian rocket lifted off on Wednesday carrying a Japanese billionaire to the International Space Station, marking the country's return to space tourism after a decade-long pause that saw the rise of competition from privately held US companies.

Online fashion tycoon Yusaku Maezawa and his production assistant Yozo Hirano blasted off from the Russia-leased Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan at 0738 GMT, an AFP correspondent at the scene said.

Their journey aboard the three-person Soyuz spacecraft piloted by cosmonaut Alexander Misurkin will take just over six hours, capping a banner year that many have seen as a turning point for private space travel.

On launch day, Maezawa and his crew left their hotel in Baikonur to a Soviet-era song played for all cosmonauts ahead of their flights. The song, about cosmonauts missing home, was sung partially in Japanese.

Maezawa's family and friends - some holding Japanese flags - waved him off as he was driven to get his spacesuit fitted.

"Dream come true," the tycoon tweeted on Wednesday morning.

Fellow billionaires Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos and Richard Branson all made breakthrough commercial tourism flights this year, bursting into a market Russia is keen to defend.

After docking at the Poisk module of the Russian segment of the ISS, the trio will spend 12 days on the station. The Japanese tourists plan to document their daily life aboard the ISS to share on Maezawa's popular YouTube channel.

The 46-year-old billionaire has set out 100 tasks to complete while on board, including hosting a badminton tournament in orbit.

The ISS is home to an international crew of seven people including two Russian cosmonauts and a Japanese astronaut.

Maezawa, who is a space enthusiast, also plans to take eight people with him on a 2023 mission around the moon operated by Musk's SpaceX.

He and his assistant will be the first private Japanese citizens to visit space since journalist Toyohiro Akiyama travelled to the Mir space station in 1990.

Before its pause from the industry, Russia had a history of shepherding self-funded tourists to space.

In partnership with US-based company Space Adventures, the Roscosmos space agency has taken eight tourists to the space station since 2001 - one of them twice.

Competing with SpaceX

The last was Canada's Cirque du Soleil co-founder Guy Laliberte in 2009, who became the first clown in space. In October, Russia launched its first untrained cosmonauts into space since that trip, delivering a Russian actress and director to the ISS where they filmed scenes for the first movie in orbit.

Moscow had stopped sending tourists to space after NASA retired the Space Shuttle in 2011, which left Russia with a monopoly on supplying the ISS.

NASA bought up all Soyuz launch seats for a reported \$90mn per spot - effectively ending tourist flights.

But that all changed last year when a SpaceX spacecraft successfully delivered its first astronauts to the ISS.

NASA began purchasing flights from SpaceX, stripping Russia of its monopoly and costing its cash-strapped space agency millions of dollars in revenue.

While the cost of tickets to space for tourists has not been disclosed, Space Adventures has indicated that they are in the range of US\$50-60mn.

Roscosmos has said it plans to continue growing its space tourism business, already commissioning two Soyuz rockets for such trips. The agency is also advertising a spacewalk to be carried out by a tourist during an ISS trip in 2023.

Roscosmos, however, is facing competition from SpaceX in space tourism too. Earlier this year, a Crew Dragon capsule took an all-civilian mission on a three-day trip around the Earth's orbit in a historic first.

Also hot on Russia's heels are Amazon founder Jeff Bezos's Blue Origin and billionaire Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic, which completed their maiden tourist voyages this year.

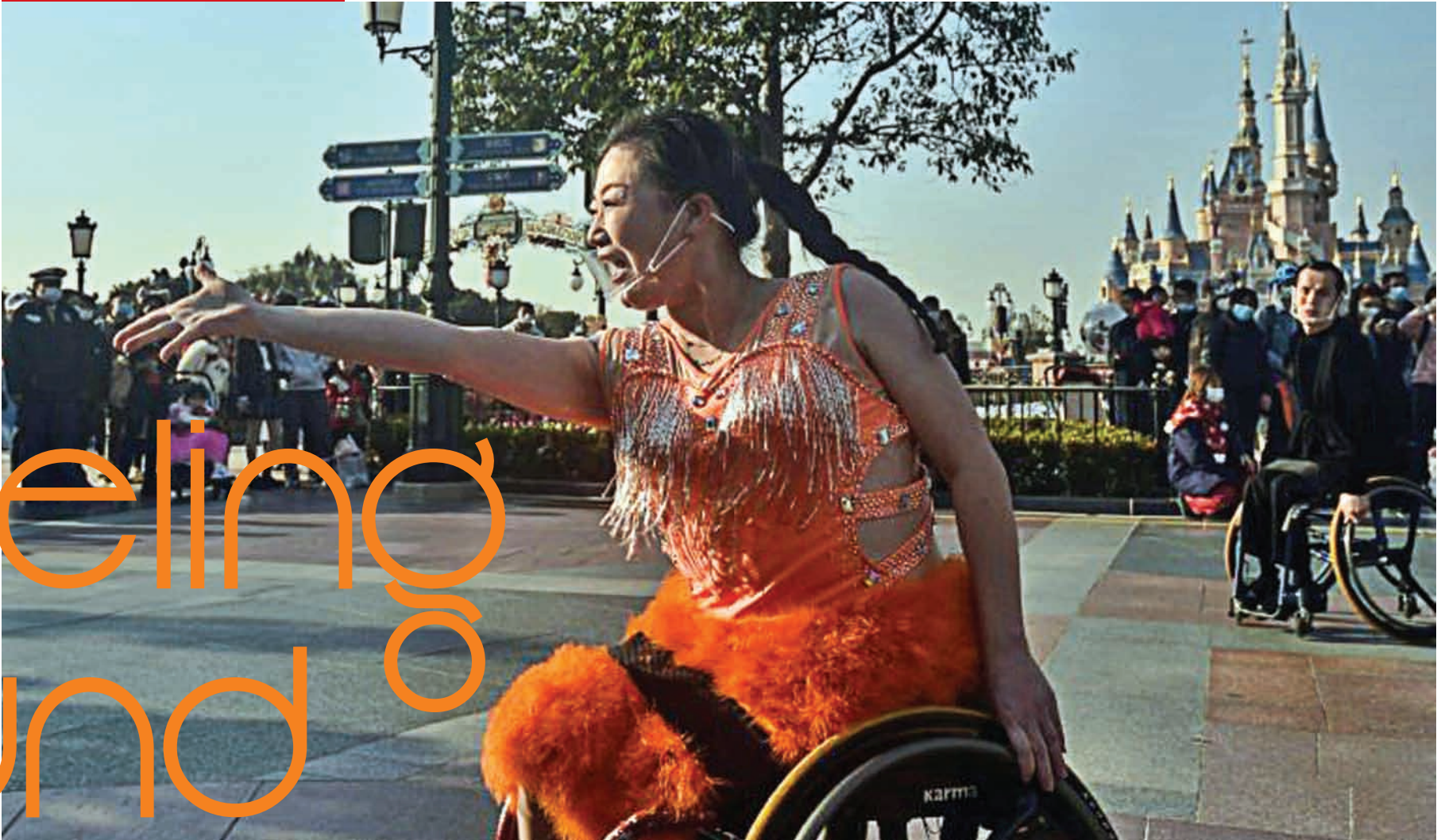
Although those companies' flights do not go into orbit, they offer several minutes in zero gravity without requiring months of training and at a significantly lower cost.

AFP

DIFFERENTLY ABLE

Shanghai wheelchair dancers find their groove despite disturbing attitudes from those who look on them as an 'inconvenience'

wheeling around



When she lost a leg to cancer at the age of 10, Shao Yue never imagined she could learn to dance. Now, she's a national wheelchair-dancing champion who hopes her story can help change perceptions of the disabled in China.

"People think we face a lot of difficulty going out... and need to rely entirely on others to survive," said the 34-year-old winner of multiple competitions.

"But we actually don't need that much help. And we don't need everyone to look at us as outsiders," adds Shao, a mother who drives her daughter to school each day.

Despite gradually modernising attitudes in China, people with disabilities say they are still treated as outsiders.

Shao trains in Shanghai with a dance troupe comprised of people with hearing

or visual impairments, as well as dancers who use wheelchairs.

The troupe aims to combat stigmas by giving disabled people a platform to express themselves through art.

"Some disabled people often feel trapped," said Zhou Ziqiang, 38, a non-disabled dance instructor who started training artists with disabilities in 2006.

"Once they join these groups, they can slowly open up and become closer to society."



In recent years, some local governments have worked to increase the number of fitness programmes available to the disabled, and invested in building dedicated sporting facilities and training instructors.

Fighting spirit

Liu Huaiyu, 20, stayed near the back of the studio during a recent troupe practice session as he and his fellow dancers spun gracefully in their wheelchairs to pulsating Chinese pop music.

Despite his shyness, he said dancing has helped bring him out of his shell.

"I used to be quite self-loathing, I didn't like talking to people," said Liu, who lost a leg in a car accident when he was 10.

"After dancing, I even go out sometimes for strolls now."

Another team in their troupe made up

of dancers with hearing impairments watched conductors at the front and back of the stage count out the beats of the routines on their fingers.

"Even though we can't hear the music, we can still follow the beat," said Chen Cen, 34, who was born without hearing but has danced since she was six years old. "We put in a lot more work than people who can hear in order to complete a routine like this," she said.

Chen hopes more Chinese can recognise the 'fighting spirit' required of disabled people, rather than viewing them as an 'inconvenience', as she puts it.

For wheelchair dancer Shao, the most important thing is how she sees herself.

"I don't despair just because I have a disability," she said. "I just have a different kind of life, and I can choose to live it in a more exciting way."

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